

# Reworking Homelessness

## *Dignity and Power at two Oahu Shelters*

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On walls, brochures and online shelter residents find time schedules and information.

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# Abstract

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*What strategies does the homeless population of Oahu use to negotiate power difference and dignity at homeless shelters?*

This thesis is based on fieldwork conducted on Oahu, Hawaii, spring 2013. It is an anthropological account of how the homeless people at two shelters – a Family Shelter and a Men’s shelter – act in ways as to cope with their situation. Who are the homeless? What does staying at a shelter do to you? How are power imbalance acted out, and how is it being challenged? Most importantly: how do the residents at the two shelters uphold a sense of dignity and respect while being residents?

Homeless is a term that not only holds the practical fact of being without permanent shelter, but is laden with moral judgment, especially in the US where one is thought to be responsible for own success or failure. It can therefore be difficult to identify *with* the term, as well as for others to grasp the diversity of the homeless population.

Stereotypical ideas about the homeless are challenged when reviewing the people having to resort to shelter services: it is not just the alcoholic or mentally ill person who seek help, but families who are in precarious positions.

Volunteering at the homeless shelters showed the differences in behavior and sources for respect utilized by the residents. At the family shelter, many used the ability to avoid relations to the staff and volunteers and to complain about food and services to keep a sense of dignity and feeling of autonomy. Through the expression of discontent, residents at the family shelter challenged the power relations especially prominent in the giver/receiver of gifts relationship they experience. The men and unsheltered use a completely different strategy, focusing on politeness, friendliness and emphasizing “good behavior” as to gain respect from staff members and volunteers. The means used to achieve respect and to even out power imbalance are very different, but serve the same purpose. This thesis investigates the issues revolving around being defined as homeless, of seeking dignity and of the power relations that exist as dynamic components of shelter life experience.

# Acknowledgements

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Behind every student, exam or in this case, a thesis, there are important supporters.

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sincerely hope that all of you are now safely living in permanent houses, with your own beds and rules. A big thank you to the island of Oahu – even with all your flaws and traffic, problems and lines, you still remain my number one home away from home.

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# Introduction

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## **Oahu, Hawaii, January 2011**

I had come to paradise! The sun and warm wind felt rejuvenating on Norwegian skin. Me and my two friends had just arrived, ready for our semester as exchange students at Hawaii Pacific University. After two nights at a hotel, my two friends and I had found a perfect apartment to rent. Big, in a nice building with a pool, close to the bus station, only a 15 min walk from the beach and with everything included. The price tag: 700\$ a month, a reasonable price for our new home for 6 months. Surely, the wonderful things we had heard about Hawaii were all true.

## **Oahu, Hawaii, February 2013**

After two weeks of spending nights at hostels, friends' floors and yet another hostel, I finally ended up having to take a tiny apartment that was way above my budget. Smaller than the smallest bedroom in the apartment we rented in 2011, I was sure I had been ripped off. Yet, after weeks searching craigslist.com for available places, I was forced to take it. Luckily, the sun still shone as it usually does over the Hawaiian isles, enabling me to spend as little time as possible inside.

Hawaii is a paradise for the tourist. A climate that is comfortably warm all year, world class shopping and a wide range of activities such as surfing, boat trips, and hiking – you name it. It also has one of USA's states worst traffic, is completely dependent on imported goods and has a growing homeless population. The island of Oahu is becoming

increasingly crowded – a noticeable difference even for the untrained eye in the short time frame of two years. When I first came to Oahu as an exchange student in 2011, there were few restaurants where one would have to wait to get a table. Coming back in 2013, I was surprised to find that at most places close to Waikiki you now did. Even hiking trails seemed more crowded, and the traffic through famous North Shore areas would be close to unbearable on weekends. Yet, although I noticed changes in many areas, my impression of Hawaii as a place of no worries, Aloha and harmony didn't change until I started working as a volunteer at one of the many homeless shelters there. It was there I learned the price so many pay for the increasing popularity of the islands. It was there I was able to realise the precariousness of Oahu.

I started volunteering at a homeless shelter thinking I would investigate the future objectives for the residents. I wanted to learn what options they had, the ways out of homelessness. When coming back to Norway, however, my field notes showed me I had done something different. I had gathered data on what shelter life was like, what restraints are put on people, and how the homeless rework their identities as such through different strategies. Reviewing the notes, I had also ended up devoting much time trying to understand the thin line between having permanent housing or not – of being in what Guy Standing calls the social group the precariat (2011).

This thesis, then, is an attempt to account for the ways in which shelter life and experience affects you as homeless. It elaborates on ways people negotiate power relations through action, drawing examples from the two different shelters I worked at: the Family Shelter and the Men's Shelter. This comparative analysis sheds light on the different means people who experience homelessness utilize to deal with their situation,

and how some avoid shelter life altogether. The aim for my fieldwork, conducted in the time frame of March 2013-July 2013, was to see how power and dignity took place and were reworked at two homeless shelters. My research question is:

**What strategies does the homeless population of Oahu use to negotiate power difference and dignity at homeless shelters?**

With this, however, comes a multiplicity of interconnected questions. First of all, I try to understand the concept of homelessness, and from there discuss ways in which power is being executed at the shelters, intended or not. For I must stress, I do not believe the staff and volunteers at the shelters work in ways they believe is either not beneficial or degrading for the residents. Even so, what I found at the shelter is that some ways of interfering in the residents' lives intended to make them more independent and capable of a stable way of living may indeed be counterproductive. These are unintended, and undesirable effects (Elster, 1989). Second, the research question calls for an elaboration of who these people are in order to understand the background and reasons for homelessness. This, in turns, sheds light on why different groups of homeless use different strategies to negotiate power and to uphold dignity. Power is often seen as something one part possesses at the expense of others. However, as this fieldwork has proved to bear proof of, power is something dynamic, and is always being negotiated within a frame of possible action. In Foucault's words, power is something that has an opening for alteration, a point of possible reversal (1982b).

My thesis is no attempt to bring forward solutions to the problem of the perhaps inevitable social hierarchy found in shelters. I hope to portray the shelter residents in a way that doesn't victimize them, but in a way that illuminates their precarious lives without stripping them of agency. What I hope to show is that the people I met at shelters, or the unsheltered homeless, were people who, despite their unfortunate situation, were able to gain respect and dignity through utilizing the means at hand. As such, I wish to find a balance between the individual action and structural oppression found in the homeless population of Oahu as well as other stigmatized, precarious groups (Bourgois, 2003). With this in mind, let us move towards a brief overlook of the field – in my case, the small island of Oahu, Hawaii, USA.

### **An interesting field**

Hawaii is a unique place. After Captain Cook first stepped onto Hawaiian land in 1778, the islands have experienced massive development and growth in immigrant population. Up for contestation, however, is whether or not this development and growth is for the better, and for whom it serves. Originally, my fieldwork was going to be based on the Hawaiian Sovereignty movement, a movement focused on retrieving land rights and autonomy to the Native Hawaiian people and their descendants. Due to practical problems such as access to the field and transportation, however, my plans quickly changed. I was forced to look elsewhere to find an interesting basis for fieldwork. What came to mind were the numerous people I would see every day, living alongside bridges, in parks and on bus stops. These people were the homeless people of Oahu, and as with living costs and tourists, the number seemed to have gone up since my

first visit in 2011. I remembered fellow students telling me that they had volunteered at different homeless shelters, and how surprised they were at who they met there. They didn't tell me about the ungroomed alcoholics I assumed homeless people were. They told me about children, families, people who had lost their jobs who simply had no place to turn but to the shelter. They told me about a segment of the population I would later recognize as the precariat: people who live insecure and unpredictable lives often associated with low income, low social class and only the unforeseen expense away from having to resort to shelter services (Standing, 2011).

And so, my fieldwork started as I entered the doors to a homeless shelter as a volunteer. Little did I know that my original plans for fieldwork and my new plan would have so many similarities. First of all, it ended up being a fieldwork based on a stigmatised part of the population. Second, as I was soon to learn, the people residing at the homeless shelter were mostly either of Hawaiian descent or from other Pacific islands. The movement I was planning on studying turned into the studying of people whose lives were deeply affected by socioeconomic conditions on Oahu. What I found was that reasons for homelessness could not be explained purely from an individualistic viewpoint, but had to be seen in relation to the emerging precariat. As with the nativistic movement, these were people who were struggling to make ends meet, who were underprivileged and had trouble getting own land rights and actually owning their homes. Renting places due to lack of equity contributes to the precarious position so many are in. In addition, as with social movements, the people residing at the shelters had their own ways of expressing discontent and rebel against the system. Of course, the ways in which this was done was far more subtle, but nevertheless it was there.

My field was the two shelters, run under the same management, located on Oahu. The shelters are only two of many, but have long experience with volunteers and were therefore well suited for an anthropology student. In addition, the shelters were located not far away from where I finally found an apartment to rent, and was therefore accessible by either bus or moped. I had to give up on finding a place with a car park, and therefore had to adjust my fieldwork with regards to accessibility. The shelters were also chosen because of the wide range of homeless people residing there, as well as services they provided. In conversation with a professor at the University of Hawaii, I was recommended I go to this shelter because it would provide me with a sense of who the homeless were, more so than just the stereotypical ideas one has. Having two separate departments; the men's shelter and the family shelter, also gave me an opportunity to compare the two, both with regards to services provided and the people I encountered. The field, then, was delineated to two large buildings and their immediate surroundings. Yet I also moved out of this limited area as we had excursions to other areas where homeless resided. Additionally, the field as such serves an incomplete portrait of all the places I gathered data. There are homeless people to be seen in most areas around Honolulu and Waikiki, and no doubt I have been influenced by the seeing and meeting homeless every day throughout my stay, as well as my prior stays on the island. Homeless are not an exotic, hid away group of people. You will see a homeless man or woman outside WalMart, resting on benches, setting up their tents along bridges or in parks. Going through Chinatown you are bound to see dozens of them, share a bus seat with them or walk past them on the sidewalk. This is also part of my impression of homelessness as a social phenomenon on Oahu. It plays part in my perception of the issues surrounding homelessness. It has also been guiding my questions and curiosity surrounding why so many seemed to choose remaining unsheltered as well as ways in



which we see homeless. The field, then, has its base within the two shelters but is also fluid, made up by the island of Oahu and the homeless themselves.

### **The fieldwork**

Having been delayed due to issues regarding my planned fieldwork, I signed up for as many days and hours at the shelters as possible. At the shelters I was to work morning shifts preparing breakfast at the men's shelter from 5am to 9am, then either go to the case management office or to the children's room after that. Some days I only had breakfast service, other days I only came in for the afternoon activities with the kids. At the beginning of my fieldwork, I spent most afternoons (2pm-5pm) volunteering with the kids' after school program. Here, I would help out with homework, make sure the kids had their after-school snack, and engage in games etcetera. The leader of this program, Angie, would always be there too. In addition, one or two other volunteers would also help out. Parents of kids younger than five would always have to accompany their kids when they spent time there. After school ended in early June, the after-school program was replaced by Summer Fun, an activity program going for five days a week, making sure the kids had something to do and sometimes make sure they had a summer holiday away from the shelter. Excursions they went on could be anything from games in the nearby park to going to a ranch for horseback riding. I would join in on the activities that were inside the shelter or nearby parks, but due to limited resources only staff could join the excursions. Most of my time at the shelters was spent with the kids and their mothers.

On breakfast service I would show up a little before five am to start preparing the meals. This was done at the men's shelter, and was a great resource in that it enabled me to see the living conditions and different attitudes the men and some women had. This opened

for being able to compare the men's shelter to the family shelter. Although most of my time was spent inside the kitchen where no actual residents were, I was allowed to hear some of the stories the staff told about the people there as well as get more insight into the daily routines at a shelter. For example, it was here I got to observe what waking up is like at a shelter: a shelter staff member giving instructions over the loudspeaker, people having to line up for breakfast, the stringent rules regarding time as well as what food was actually served. The men's shelter was also the place where outreach activities was planned and executed from, an activity I had the chance to participate in on one occasion. That also proved a good source of insight into the diversity of Oahu's homeless.

The third place I would volunteer was at the case management office, located in the family shelter building. My access to this part of the building was a great way to observe the rules and regulations within the building's many locked doors. The office was where the staff kept all the contracts, files, where they stored belongings for residents and held meetings. It was where everyone who needed help or had questions had to go, which made it a good place to learn what concerns the shelter residents might have had. It was in the case management office I had the chance to speak to an important informant, Keko, who was the manager there. Due to my different tasks – for example, organizing files, making lists and the like - I was also allowed full access to the files on all the residents who were receiving medical assistance. Again, such access gave me the opportunity to get a more diverse picture of who the residents were and why they were there.

## Method

As the preceding paragraphs have shown, most of my fieldwork was conducted whilst working as a volunteer. In the forthcoming parts, I will explain more detailed how the acquisition of data was done. I will also discuss obstacles and difficulties in the field, gaining access to it and who my informants were.

Anthropology is an inductive science. It is therefore a given that what you plan to do and what you may end up finding might not correspond. This was indeed the case for me, first with having to change my field and research question completely, then with the reviewing of my fieldnotes when coming home. I was certain I had conducted fieldwork that was investigating the many or few opportunities the homeless had to change their life situation. Yet, as I was to learn when I came home and sat down with my data, I had much richer observations regarding power relations and strategies. Part of why I had more material on this was the method I had used to collect data.

## Observing

For the most part, I observed. I was a volunteer, and the status as such gave me, albeit limited, access to many areas of both shelters. The name tag showing I was volunteering gave me a reason to be at the shelters and tasks to do. For my own sake, the name tag made me feel like I was also contributing, helping me justify asking so many questions to staff members, taking notes at the case management office and to simply sit around and observe. It enabled me to watch and listen what people did without seeming suspicious or making the conversations awkward. When spending time at the children's room or the kitchen, I would normally simply keep my eyes and ears open, sometimes asking questions trying to make the staff or children elaborate on things they themselves had brought up. The reasons why I didn't ask too many questions when volunteering with

the children have obvious ethical concerns, which will be discussed at length later. In general, my thesis is based on pure observations of incidents, taking notice on where people were spending time, what they were doing. Questions I would usually have in my mind were mundane things such as how many people I saw, if they looked inactive or preoccupied, how they interacted with each other. What did they talk about? Who were they standing or sitting next to? Most importantly, I was very aware of how I was treated, acknowledged and talked too. This was also interesting due to my status as a volunteer. I was neither a staff member nor a resident, which made me rather unimportant for most residents, especially at the family shelter. As a volunteer I could simply help out with more practical things such as ask for help by staff or perform tasks such as getting the snacks for the kids. I was not, however, allowed to decide when the snacks would be handed out or what to eat; I had no authority and no privileges that I could help the residents with. If the residents had come to me with questions or requests, I would still have to ask one of the staff. Therefore, I was just an unnecessary middleman in their eyes.

Everything is data. The line is one anthropology students hear repeatedly throughout their studies. Not until actually getting in the field did it become clear to me what the words actually entailed. My first weeks at the family shelter were frustrating because I didn't feel like I was learning anything about the families there or about homelessness. I was avoided, no one would speak to me and most mothers I met seemed to dislike me; my smiles were not returned, whatever questions I had were answered in singular words. I had planned to really get to know some of these women, maybe ask if I could conduct an in-depth interview, or at least a few shorter, unstructured ones. However, even getting eye contact seemed very difficult, and I soon gave up on the thought.

Instead, I decided to see what they were – and weren't – doing while their children were being taken care of in the children's room. However, it would soon turn out that the mothers' activity levels were very limited. In general, the mothers that were accompanying their kids were sitting still, sometimes talking to their kids if they were acting up. Most of the time, however, they let the volunteers and staff do the reprimanding, looking uninterested in what was going on. Again, the behaviour that seemed of no relevance at first came to inhabit a rich meaning when later reviewing my notes. Boredom, apathy, giving up responsibility for parenting – the mothers joining us on a day to day basis embodied what shelter life does, and how so many choose to deal with shelterization, a term I use to explain the effects shelter life has on its residents.

Observing meant not only seeing how residents and staff interacted, or how they interacted with each other, but also meant that I was very aware of how I was treated and related to by residents. After all, I was the only one I could always observe without missing anything. How guests acted towards me was of great importance, but I also tried to notice ways I was being treated and acknowledged by the other volunteers and shelter staff. For example, I was treated mostly as a volunteer and a help when doing kitchen service, but when I helped out in the case management office I was also the subject of questions about myself, my interest in the field and so on. Especially the leader of the program, Kekoa, showed interest in my studies and my background. On more than one occasion he stressed that I needed to see the links between my own background and how some residents had ended up at the shelter. The case management office proved an important place for information, and was a place I could easily talk to other employees.

## Interviews

Another method I utilized was interviewing. Although not as in-depth and with all the people I wanted to interview, I did get useful information through this method. The interviews were conducted with different staff members: I had the chance to have a few unstructured interviews with Kekoa, as he was in charge of the case management program. His knowledge about mental illness was not of most importance to me, but his insight on how it was like growing up as part of Oahu's precarious segment of the population was. He constantly reminded me that most residents were ordinary people who for one reason or another had ended up in a precarious position. This was insightful and guiding my fieldwork and interest. On most occasions, he would simply call me into his cubicle and have me sit down, before starting off by either telling a story or asking me a question. As I usually carried my notebook around when at the case management office, I would normally have questions ready. If I didn't, his stories would normally also lead to more questions and interest. Another staff member I had the chance to talk to at length was the leader of the outreach-program at the men's shelter, James. This gave me the opportunity to get more of an idea what was going on at the men's shelter as well as work outside shelters. I was allowed into his office, located in the men's shelter, and to hear stories of people they had, in his words "saved from life on the streets", people who had sobered up, and people with health issues who had gotten assistance.

More so than simply noting their words I tried to stay conscious of the ways stories were told, what was emphasized, body language and the selection of stories I was told. In anthropology, focus is on behaviour and verbal statements. But in order for a deeper understanding one must also try to go, in Wikan's words, beyond the words (2012). I conducted unstructured interviews, and usually I was trying to steer the conversation in

on what obstacles they (James and Kekoa) were facing when it came to people who did not seem to want help or they kept trying to convince to come to the shelter. Yet they were both very preoccupied with telling me about the people they *had* helped, and when asked about why people chose to live on the streets I was told that a huge problem was anosognosia. Anosognosia became a well-known word for me, as it was also a hot topic when case managers had a joint meeting to discuss patients. In short, it is a term that's used to explain why some homeless seem to refuse help – anosognosia is the failure to understand the gravity of one's situation. And so, even though the interviews were informative due to what I was told, they provided just as much insight when reviewing what *wasn't* said: alternative explanations to not wanting to stay at the shelter serves as an example.

Throughout my fieldwork I also engaged in conversations with anyone who would talk. Kayla, a woman I met at the family shelter, would usually engage in long conversations with me while helping out with the children after school. Talking to the kids about whatever interested them was also something I did almost daily, yet I refrained from asking too specific questions. Usually Angie, the children's program manager, would have the children write down things they were grateful for or make drawings of things that made them happy. Making a dream-drawing was also a common activity, and it was through these drawings I got a better impression of how preoccupied the children were with houses, castles and fortresses. It was by far the most common design.

### Written sources

In addition to pure observations and interviewing, I used written sources as a way to collect data. The range of these sources is very wide. One source of information is, of course, anthropological writings on homelessness. But at the shelters, I also reviewed

contracts, pamphlets, brochures, lists and notes that were put up on the corkboards that were around. In addition, I read a newspaper dedicated and made by Oahu's homeless population named "Street Beat". I used these sources not only as information about what was on the pages, but also as artefacts with meaning. For example, a contract giving a case manager the right to control your finances is not only a sheet of paper containing words, but for a homeless man or woman it is a paper that has a multitude of meanings. It means help – yet it also means giving up part of the control you have over your own life, own schedule, the right to dispose own money. The newspaper served as a source of information because it had written statements from homeless who uttered discontent with staff, shelter services or how they were portrayed in media. It also had a diary-like section where homeless and unsheltered could send in contributions explaining how they felt, concerns they had and how they were actually living. This was not the only way the newspaper provided me with information, however: just the fact that there is a market and a need for an own newspaper created for and by homeless tells us something about the magnitude of the problem and how many experiencing homelessness on this Hawaiian island.

All the above methods have been combined in order to try and best grasp the lives of the homeless that spent their days at the shelters where I worked.

### **Role and Positioning**

It is common to speak of status when writing anthropology, usually focusing on what is achieved or ascribed by others. I was perceived in ways that were out of my control. I tried to steer people's ideas about me in certain directions I thought would be good for my fieldwork, to gain their trust. These were deliberate choices made in order to gain



access to the field. One of the first choices made was done in collaboration with the University of Hawaii professor, when I chose to enter the shelter as a volunteer, not as for example a trainee or simply an observer. I wanted to be able to contribute, and I also thought my status as a volunteer would make people there think of me as a person who was there to help out and therefore be well disposed towards me. After a while, I learned that many volunteers were people who either had to volunteer due to school requirements or wanted extra points on their resume. A few people I met were there because they genuinely wanted to make a difference, and some were volunteering because they had too much spare time. One Hawaiian man, when asked why he chose to sign up as a volunteer, said: "I want to volunteer because I care about my people (meaning other Native Hawaiians). I see how things are going – more homeless Hawaiians, more poor people. I just wanna help out". Again, it is easy to draw lines between the Nativist movement and the emergence of so many homeless on Oahu. At the volunteer information meeting, I met all of the above, but there was a definite over representation of High School students. And so, I was only one of many who was seen as someone there to "get points" for volunteering.

The shelter had strict rules when it came to clothing: no tank tops, short shorts or skirts, one was to look presentable and without any revealing clothes. At the information meeting, we were also told to avoid hairstyles and accessories that they saw unfit, such as brightly coloured hair, showing tattoos and so forth. It was made clear that we were setting examples for the kids and other residents, and we were expected to dress and act in ways to do so. The dress code increased the similarities of some of the volunteers. For example, I worked alongside a girl who was about my age and was volunteering through a school program. More than once I was mistaken for being her and she me, which made

me think that the residents saw us more as a group of volunteers than as individuals. When getting dressed before going to the shelter I also made some deliberate choices to avoid clothes that were marked with what brand they were, or to look over dressed in any way. I wanted to avoid being labelled as someone well off or that was focused on material things. I would sometimes also try to wear garments that I thought would make me look older. The reason was that I usually felt very young. I was younger than everyone at the case management office and in the kitchen, and when I was asked about my age I was always met by surprise because people thought I was younger. My role as a caretaker for the kids and helping with homework made me wish I was older to justify being an authority compared to the parents of the children and the adults we served breakfast.

Throughout my fieldwork I was perceived differently by different people. For the staff members, I was a volunteer, a contributor, a student, someone to ask to run errands. At the case management office I was interesting because I was studying and was Norwegian. At the men's shelter I was a volunteer, but also a young woman whom some of the men found interesting and saw as an opportunity to try out some pick-up lines. With the kids I was someone who they could play with, I hadn't been there long enough to tire from their games and I was someone they could test. The children also found interest in asking me about where I was from, and most of them still think that I was wrong when I said Norway, because my description of what it was like surely sounded much more like the North Pole. To the parents I was an unknown person who chose to volunteer, I was someone who they would hopefully not have to spend too much time with; after all, their stay at the shelter was only temporary.

My role in the field is of great importance because it not only affects what information I could get, but also ways people treated me. In chapter two I elaborate on this, and analyse the ways my role as someone the parents didn't need to make friends with influenced their behaviour towards me. My role as a volunteer gave me some advantages in that I was allowed on most areas so long as I asked, and I felt appreciated. Yet it also stood in the way of some insights. As with Weiner's famous fieldwork among the even more so famous Trobrianders made famous by Malinowski, she gained access to a whole different sphere than Malinowski did. In the same way, another person holding a different role would have gained access to other fields of data than I did. I am here getting in to the importance and effects of positioning.

I could dress in specific ways, stress my Norwegian heritage and attempt to look older, yet what others thought of me was always out of my control. It is therefore all the more important to be conscious of one's position in the field, both to see own shortcomings and advantages. The notion of reflexivity, "the constant awareness, assessment, and reassessment by the researcher of the researcher's own contribution/influence/shaping of intersubjective research and the consequent research findings" (Salzman, 2002:806) is diligently used by anthropologists today to ensure a sense of veracity. I have tried to apply reflexivity to my own thesis in order to achieve this. For example, I have taken into consideration the actual incentives that shelter residents would have to talk to me – pretty much non-existing because of my role in the field. This, of course, has not only influenced what information I gathered but also the whole direction my fieldwork took. Without considering my own position, I could have simply dismissed the parents at the family shelter as rude and perhaps shy. Reflexivity is also a way of making the reader able to analyze the empirical data presented in a way that takes into consideration the

ethnographer's position. One of the ways to do this is through noticing and reflecting on your position. Positioning is about your own baggage – your own experiences, your base for understanding others. Having written extensively on the topic, R. Rosaldo writes that “all interpretations are provisional; they are made by positioned subjects who are prepared to know certain things and not others” (1989: 8). As ethnographers we are both faced with the sometimes problematic fact of being ascribed a certain role as well as our dealing with our own background. Our background, in turn, predisposes us for some knowledge – excluding us from gaining other. I argue that what you are *expected* or *thought* by others to know something about also affects the access and trust you receive. The families at the shelter saw me arriving on my moped, they knew I was going to a University and that I had afforded coming to Hawaii. They also knew I wasn't working while there and that I lived closer to Waikiki. Their assumptions must have been very much in line with thinking that I knew nothing about their lives, their struggles, what it was like to be in their precarious position. Why, then, would they want to share stories of their lives with me? I tried to blend in as best I could, but fact of the matter is that I was educated, probably perceived as well off, young and white.

I cannot say I know much about being homeless. I have never experienced homelessness, yet as an anthropology student I don't believe that identical life experiences necessarily make you a better ethnographer. R. Rosaldo writes that he could only understand headhunting after experiencing a tragic loss of his own (1989). That does not, however, mean that you know exactly what the other person feels when faced with loss. What it enables you to do is to resonate – a term not requiring the exact same experiences, but a willingness and open mind to what is being said (Wikan, 2012). R. Rosaldo writes not necessarily of the importance of same experiences, but of the mind

set an ethnographer needs to have when going into the field. He experienced a re-positioning after the tragic death of his wife, and for him it took that experience to understand the Ilongots' rage in facing grief. He was unable to take what the Ilongots said literally because he couldn't believe that headhunting and rage were interconnected with grief. In anthropology, then, what is of the utmost importance is to take what people say – and do – seriously. "It is about trying to understand how people interpret and act in the world" (MacClancy, 2002:4). In MacClancy's spirit, I tried not only to be conscious of my own shortcomings, but also to try and take what people did tell me seriously. As for example an episode explained in chapter two when we asked a man if he wanted to come with us to the shelter. The man replied that he was happy where he was, that he had found a good place to sleep at night and so on. His reasons could be many, and perhaps he lied in order to not have to answer more questions. However, methodologically I have chosen to take the stand that what people say is true, whether or not I can fully understand it. Should I have tried to explain his statements by looking for an underlying, deeper meaning? I have consciously tried to take actions and statements for what they are, for what is being said. When, as will be explained in the coming chapters, a woman said she didn't want to shower because she was afraid the Samoan staff members were spying on her, I didn't question her delusions telling her just that or thinking she was just making it up as an excuse. Methodically, I am and have tried to stay as true and close to the observations I made.

In accordance with Wikan's plea for an anthropology where the ethnographer seeks resonance, my efforts were aimed at doing just that: finding common grounds, trying my best to level with the other residents and to make them feel comfortable around me. Yet, despite my efforts, "Resonance demands something of both parties to communication, of

both reader and author: an effort at feeling-thought; a willingness to *engage* with another world, life or idea” (Wikan, 1992:463). The latter part, emphasizing the willingness of your informants is what became most challenging for my fieldwork. And no wonder: there are no reasons or incentives for the shelter residents at the family shelter to engage in conversation with me. One reason is the practical fact that I was simply one of many volunteers. Another is the fact that I could not offer any types of services, because I would nevertheless have to go to one of the staff members and ask for permission. A third reason, which is further explored in the following chapters, is the temporality of the families’ stay. As one fellow student at Hawaii Pacific University put it when asked about all the exchange students there: “I really don’t make an effort to get to know them. It’s no point, they’re exchange students, so they’ll leave soon anyway”. The volunteers were a group of people that would come and go. In addition, the families staying at the shelter were hoping to make their stay as short as possible. Add the two of them up, and there is no wonder no one would even bother trying to get to know me.

### **Ethical concerns**

The very nature of fieldwork is based on trust, about people sharing and showing parts of their lives. Anthropology is the science of man, and so we tell stories of people. In addition, we write about it, print it, and analyze it. No matter who and what we study, our analysis and portrayal of the people who let us do so can be hurtful or have negative consequences. In particular, this goes for the people we study who are in precarious positions (AAA Ethics Blog). Conducting an ethically responsible fieldwork is therefore essential. It is also extremely important not only to evaluate ethics while conducting fieldwork, but to be ethically reflexive, realize what can be ethically problematic in

hindsight and to identify the ways in which we can deal with the ethical dilemmas we may face (Castañeda, 2006).

Homeless people are definitely one of today's most precarious segments of the population. As the forthcoming chapters show, being homeless is associated with stigma and negative connotations. It is a vulnerable group because of this, and also because of how the people in question are experiencing their life situation. At the shelters where I volunteered, I also met and spoke to other groups of people who can be said to be even more vulnerable. I met men who had just been let out of jail, I saw people struggling with addiction and I heard stories told by men and women who were mentally ill. Additionally, I worked most days with small children. All of the above are people whose lives are especially precarious, and who sometimes may not have too much control over what they say. It is a Norwegian saying that if you want to know the truth you should ask drunken people or children – I encountered both. What is ethically challenging are the incentives that people have for talking to you. Do they expect anything back? Do they say some things and leave out others in order to make themselves look good? Conducting fieldwork as a volunteer hopefully made me a person that, even though not very interesting to talk to, at least people didn't come to me hoping for special privileges or money.

The children were a difficult group for me to write about, because they didn't know I was using their words and behavior as a basis for my analysis. Additionally, they were the most trusting and open of the residents at the family shelter. It didn't take me long to decide that I would use their verbal accounts and actions, but refrain from asking too many questions. I avoided asking the children personal questions, questions about their family or how they experienced shelter life. I made the decision to refrain from

interviews, perhaps at the expense of valuable information, but on behalf of good ethics. I did not want to exploit the children's' trust in me, nor disrespect their parents' choice not to share information with me. Ethics in anthropology is a complex matter, and can be viewed as from many angles, as an ethnographer, student, reader and informant. For example, the ethnographer may himself use reflexivity to evaluate ethics in own fieldwork and representation, as Levy-Strauss did in his discussion of ethics in "Tristes Tropiques". He was let in on the secret names of some of the Nambikwara after playing with some young girls in the tribe (Levi-Strauss, 1992). Although his first knowledge about the names was not encouraged by him, he later wrote about it and used the information. For my fieldwork, I made an effort not to obtain sensitive information about the families and children as to decrease my chances of having to face such an ethical dilemma.

In the same way, the people struggling with mental disabilities, such as Kayla who you will meet in chapter one was challenging. These people have not asked to be observed, to be giving up information. Another aspect of my fieldwork that proved ethically challenging was the full access to patients' files at the case management office. Not only was personal information stored there, but I was also not hearing *their* story, I was reading what a case manager had thought about them when conducting structured, formalized interviews. Ex-convicts who attended meetings sharing stories from prison and difficulties they were having after getting out is also an example of difficult situations people were in. Listening to stories and taking notes sometimes felt wrong because I was unsure of how I could later write and analyze it in ways that kept my informants' dignity. This is indeed the biggest responsibility an anthropologist has, making sure that one's work does not negatively impact the people studied. Adding to



that, however, are multiple ways of conducting an ethically responsible fieldwork, followed by a thesis written in the same manner.

To ensure an ethically responsible fieldwork and thesis, I have made certain choices along the way. First of all, I was completely open about my studies and fieldwork towards the shelter staff, and I asked them for their opinions and guidance regarding what to say and not to the shelter residents. I was encouraged to take on the role as a volunteer, not as an anthropology student. We also agreed that if asked, I would reply with honesty: that yes, I was a volunteer but I also studied anthropology and was volunteering there to understand and write about shelter life. However, as mentioned, shelter residents had little or no interest in me at the family shelter, so it was never brought up there. At the men's shelter I was asked about what I was doing on Oahu etcetera, and I answered truthfully, yet no one who asked seemed surprised or very interested in what I was doing. As for the case management office and the other people I worked/volunteered with, I was always clear on why I was there. Kekoa took great interest in my studies and was willing to share his own experience having worked there for about five years as well as for me to gain access to whatever content I'd like. His only request was that I never used the patients' full names – which I had no intention of doing anyway.

I had very restricted access to the families at the shelter. No one shared personal information with me, and so this fieldwork has not been about personal experiences of homelessness, reasons for homelessness or other highly sensitive topics. Although some empirical examples are taken from personal uttered feelings, the main analysis is based on interaction between volunteers, staff and the shelter residents. I was not there at night time when lights went out to hear the worries and concerns that people had. I

observed when the residents were in more or less public space. Although these factors may limit my data, at least the data I have gathered and used are not of a highly sensitive nature compared to if I was allowed to join them in a more private space. Conducting fieldwork at a homeless shelter also puts limitations to how private a sphere it can be said to be; the shelter is open, you are watched, and you don't have much privacy. For my purposes, then, observing during the daytime with other volunteers and staff around does give a picture of how shelter life actually is. Because of my limited access, the thesis is about how people act and cope with being at shelters. In that sense, the research question I have chosen is in itself a way to ensure a responsible fieldwork. I was, and am not after the deep emotional stress and feelings that homelessness brings. What I have tried to account for are the ways in which such feelings and experiences are acted out in the shelter space.

Most importantly, I have made an effort to anonymize the shelter residents. I have done so by not making known the shelter names – and there are quite a few on Oahu. In addition, I have not given away specific locations making it possible to identify which shelters I have written about, and I have not written the correct names on shelter staff. I have also altered some of the staff's positions within the shelter, as well as backgrounds. What I have tried to stay true to, however, are the descriptions of specific situations and people involved. I have done so in order to keep the person anonymized, yet staying true to my fieldnotes and empirical data. After all, for a thesis to be ethically grounded, what matters most is the veracity of your work, and that, if read by your informants, they can recognize and resonate with what has been written.

Ethics in anthropology thus has two facets: on the one side, you are responsible for protecting your informants' identities, to avoid them being put in difficult situations. At

the shelter, when answering the phone, one was not allowed to make known the whereabouts of the person the caller was seeking. This was done so as to protect the person in question and to respect their decision of whether or not they wanted people to know they were staying at a shelter. The other facet is your responsibility to make an account for what was said and done with a strong sense of securing an utmost truthful representation. This not only makes sure that your informants are taken seriously and therefore treated with respect and in an ethically responsible way, it also ensures that the reader is provided with the same. Anthropology is a science, and should therefore strive to bring forth scientific data. Finding the balance between new discoveries and protecting the identities and lives of the people studied is imperative.

Representing people – writing accounts of how events happened, what was said, how it was said – is not an easy task. I hope to have written a thesis that my informants would not be offended by or feel unfamiliar with. I have tried to make everyone anonymous without stripping them of relevant information. Most of all, this thesis has been based on information which I have felt has been most appropriate and relevant for the research question. I have taken advantage of the fact that anthropology is an inductive science, and adapted my research question and direction of fieldwork based on that. The result, I hope, is an ethically sound thesis that has a clear foundation on actual verbal and behavioral observations.

# Chapter 1

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## Homeless on Oahu

*My experience with homelessness so far on Oahu has been the people I see every day living around the area where I'm currently renting a ridiculously expensive one-room apartment. It has no kitchen, is 12 square meter and painted in the most horrid color green imaginable. As I make my way to the bus stop, I don't question the reasons to homelessness on Oahu: for my apartment, I pay 900\$ a month with no Internet, no parking and no washing machine included.*

In the introduction of Philippe Bourgois' ethnography on crack dealers in East Harlem, New York, he discusses how Western society in particular has a way of justifying that some people are worse off than themselves (2003). Blaming the marginalized people for their situation seems to be an effective means to avoid having to take responsibility or make an effort to change social structures that put restraints on people in need. Blaming the individuals themselves also makes the problem of homelessness much easier to deal with (Lyon-Callo, 2000). Although Bourgois' (2003) book is about underground economy and crack dealers, the theme and theory he utilizes seems very befitting when analysing homelessness in Hawaii. This is because, in Bourgois' own words, "Substance abuse in the inner city is merely a symptom – and a vivid symbol – of deeper dynamics of social marginalization and alienation" (2003:12). Homelessness on Oahu can be seen in much the same way – as a symptom of urbanization, and a challenging economy. In

this chapter, I explore the definition and meaning of homelessness, creating a base for analysing actions and ways to negotiating dignity in chapter two. I account for the heterogeneity of the people I met, hopefully mapping out a diverse field of people who, for varying reasons, have ended up as homeless.

In the forthcoming paragraphs I discuss the difficulties defining homelessness, the difficulties people have defining *with it* and who these people really are. Young, old, Hawaiian, Caucasian or Japanese, man or woman – although people experience discrimination based on these traits, *homelessness* does not. I wish to show the vast range of people who go under the category of homeless. I will also touch upon the emerging social class known as the precariat, a group that “[...] consists a multitude of insecure people, living bits-and-pieces lives, in and out of short-term jobs, without a narrative of occupational development” (Standing, 2011). I start by examining the seemingly simple term “homeless” before moving on to the part of actually identifying with it. From there, I wish to give the reader a more diverse outlook on who these homeless people are, as I myself was constantly challenged to rework my ideas of “the homeless person”.

### **Homeless – what’s in a name?**

*“Do you see that man, auntie Linda? He looks really dirty. I’ve seen them wash up in the drinking fountain, with soap and everything. The other day, me and my mom saw a homeless man outside of Burger King and we gave him some food.”*

I looked down at Serenity and smiled, telling her that that was a very nice thing of them to do. She continued:

*“Then we gave him some money, too, 4\$. Actually, we gave him 40\$.”*

Serenity is one of three siblings living with their mom at the shelter. On the day she told me this story, I was volunteering with the “Summer Fun” program that the shelter organizes every year. The goal of the program is to give the kids at the shelter a break from daily life, as well as enable them to join in on fun activities. On this particular day we were having games in the nearby park, where many homeless without any kind of shelter spend their days. I found her story particularly interesting because it seemed she thought of this man as being utterly different from her and her family’s situation. I would classify her and her family as homeless, simply because they do not have a house to live in and are depending on others to provide shelter until they get back on their feet. However, this (about) 7 year old girl saw a clear distinction between herself and the homeless people living in the park, a mere 3 minute walk from the shelter where she lived. The story is telling because it says something about the difficulties in defining homelessness, and especially how difficult it can be to identify *with* the term.

Glasser and Bridgman (1999) write that there are plenty of different ways to define homelessness, and the words people use differ cross-culturally. The UN defines homelessness quite simply as “being without shelter” (Tsemberis, 2010). However, there are so many ideas associated with the definition of homeless that I strongly believe that such a simplistic definition has major shortcomings if to understand how people experience homelessness. Not only did Serenity’s words prove this, but also my own

experience at the shelter seems to call for a more diverse definition of homelessness. To further shed light this issue I supplement my own empirical data with the writings of Liebow (1993) and Marcus (2003).

Liebow writes that “homeless people are homeless because they do not have a place to live” (1993:223). However, this definition excludes the many people who indeed have shelter and a place to live, but are depending on others to provide that shelter. In today’s Hawaii, being homeless need not imply that you sleep on the street. There are numerous shelters there, and some people only spend a few nights at the shelter, some nights with family or friends and occasionally on the streets. Even there, the conditions vary.

Everything ranging from the people finding a park bench to building their own improvised house or tent from whatever they found was something I would see on a daily basis. Some make camp along bridges or under bridges, some find shelter in caves away from the public eye. Nevertheless, I would classify them all as homeless. Marcus writes extensively about the difficulties defining homelessness, and tries to build his understanding of the term based on informants’ words (2003). The problem with doing this, however, is that based on my own fieldwork and readings, many find it problematic to identify with being homeless and so explain or define homelessness in terms so as to exclude themselves (Glasser and Bridgman, 1999:3). Stigmatization and shame are closely related to identifying with homelessness, and so people find ways to work around the concept. As Serenity exemplified, how you see yourself and how others see you doesn’t necessarily correspond. Accepting and identifying with the term can be compared to that of being diagnosed with a disease: people view you differently, you are suddenly a deviant. As Lyon-Callo writes, homeless people in general are subject to

being made into patients, homelessness is understood in medical terms (2000). By identifying with homelessness, then, you implicitly accept your “diagnose”, even if what caused your “disease” are structural forces.

So how do I use the term homeless? It would be easy to move away from the term completely and say that I am writing a thesis on the people I encountered at the shelter. Yet, despite the differences and diversity among the people I met, they do share certain commonalities. And in order to analyse and understand behaviour and incentives that residents have to act in certain ways it is crucial to understand what those commonalities are. In addition, their shared life situation may be dealt with in various ways, depending on their perception of self, their status and their experience of being homeless. In this thesis, then, I will refer to homeless as a common term for someone who temporarily or permanently resides at shelters, people who are unable for different reasons to obtain permanent housing such as apartments, houses and the like, or sleep outside. It includes those who do not necessarily spend nights outside but who are constantly depending on shelter from others such as relatives or friends yet have no permanent residency at either place. It excludes people who for different cultural reasons choose to move from place to place and refrain from permanent housing. Most importantly, I apply the term homeless to the population that were living on Oahu. This means that homeless in this thesis is seen within a cultural context where permanent housing is the norm and, in most cases, desirable. With this in mind, let us move onward to further discuss the problems related to the term homeless itself.



## Home is where the heart is – the problem of meaning

Being classified as homeless is not just a practical fact, but needs to be seen as a social status. Prototype is a useful term in this context, because most people in western society today don't see "homeless" as something simply meaning having no permanent place to stay. We have ideas about how homeless people look, dress, act and so on. As Serenity showed, even the homeless have a hard time identifying with it because of these engrained ideas. The defining trait of homelessness is being without permanent housing, but it is our other ideas about what the "ultimate" homeless is that makes up the prototype. For many, a homeless person is one that walks around in the streets with bags or a shopping cart filled with their belongings. They look unclean and ungroomed; maybe they collect bottles or beg for money. A common conception is also that homeless are either drug addicts, have mental health issues, or both. In some places, homelessness is also inextricably bound to ethnicity (Marcus, 2003). On Oahu, you see plenty of these characteristically homeless braving the streets. These are the people we see and notice, they're not the ones necessarily trying to get into permanent housing, to get jobs where their pay check will actually be sufficient to pay rent or to get sober after years of drinking. And so, the distinction between the homeless population living on the streets and those living in shelters is quite striking. Even Serenity recognized the major difference between herself and her family and the man sleeping in the park, even though they both go under the same UN definition of homeless. As an anthropology student, I believed that I had a relatively good understanding of the heterogeneity found in the homeless population. Yet, I was forced to face my own preconceptions when I found myself shocked during a shelter mission where staff and volunteers went out into the field to seek out homeless people who wanted help. The following account was written after the outreach day:

*After walking around in the nearby streets, we decided to go to a place where the staff knew there were a lot of homeless people in need. We got in cars and drove onto the highway, ironically enough one of the most expensive highways ever built in the US. After a 10-minute drive, we took the next exit right by a huge bridge connecting roads coming from different sides of the island. I was to learn that underneath this massive construction made of concrete and steel, there were "houses" built by homeless men and women. Stepping out of the car, I wasn't sure what smells hit me first. The fiery Hawaiian sun seemed to only increase the stench of exhaust mixed with garbage and the unmistakable smell of urine. But we could not actually see anyone, and so we had to start walking, almost crawling under the bridges winding over us like giant worms, underlining the stark contrast between the tourist-beloved sun and the darkness.*

*Underneath the bridges, we found the constructions that people there called home. Boxes, sheets and other things were utilized to create some sort of privacy. There were no toilets and no running water here, and all that surrounded it was the heavy traffic and more concrete and asphalt. I was surprised by the skills and imagination exhibited by the people living there: their living space was carefully planned and made to be as safe and comfortable as possible. Other volunteers told me that many had constructed their homes in ways to make it almost invisible to outsiders in order to avoid being forced to demolish it by law enforcers. This saved time and effort, and gave the person living there more of a stable living space as well as a secure place to keep their belongings. A few houses were extremely well hidden: built above ground underneath the bridge, using the construction of*

*the bridge to their advantage. Some had seemingly dug out parts from underneath the bridge to make it a cave like house, and some even kept dogs or other pets behind chicken wire. In the midst of the bridges and living area, a big “room” had been set up, with cardboard floors, some chairs and a long bench. Here there were six people gathered, talking and playing with puppies. Apart from the smell and the low standard of material, the area around the highway bridge reminded me of a small village, with the big room serving the purpose of a square. Nobody owned this big space; it was used as a common living area for the people living there. In short, it seemed this place was a sophisticated and far from random residing place for some of Oahu’s homeless.*

*Walking through the maze of roads and stakes, more and more “homes” became visible, and we were able to talk to their residents. The people we encountered here also fit my preconceptions; as this was an area known by the caseworkers as one where drug addicts, especially users of methamphetamine, used to find shelter. The men and women we talked to were grateful for the water and other things we brought them, but seemed uninterested in hearing about the shelter.*

*Our “rounds” nearly coming to an end, we walked to the last bridge where the caseworkers knew some homeless people resided. To even be able to see where they lived, we had to sit down on the gravel and look underneath the bridge. From where I was sitting, I could only barely make out the shoes that were approaching. Then, climbing out from underneath the bridge and into the sunlight was a woman, probably about my age. She seemed shy, almost uncomfortable that we were there to see her in her misery. Her clothes looked nice and*

*clean, her hair and makeup spotless. She was the anomaly, the unexpected sight in the midst of trash, highways and drug addicts. Since she seemed so uncomfortable, most of us backed off and let the case manager talk to her. They were speaking softly and I didn't have a chance to hear what they were saying. Perhaps I wouldn't have understood it anyway, because I was completely baffled at the sight of her. She just didn't fit in.*

*So, there I was, the world travelling anthropologist trying to convince my friends and family that being homeless in Hawaii had nothing to do with who or what you are – yet I was speechless when seeing this young woman that could've been a fellow student when I realized where and how she lived. Talk about getting a reality check. Not so much in the sense that the woman didn't have a place to live, but that I had been so sure I wouldn't be surprised and that I had gotten rid of all my stereotypical ideas about homeless people. Clearly, my engraved ideas were lurking deep inside, causing the surprise. I remember talking to the other volunteers, hearing their reactions and thoughts. At the time, I was focused on how she looked nothing like I'd imagined. In hindsight, I'm more focused on how I could think that seeing her there was so surprising, since I'd been so good at telling everyone else to widen their perspective and see the true problems underlying homelessness in Hawaii. More and more families and people in general are only a paycheck away from losing their apartment. Wages simply aren't enough to pay rent, electricity, food and other necessities. This means that no matter how young, pretty, old, good or bad you are, addict or not – you risk losing a place to sleep at night. And where do you go? For this woman, the place to go was under the bridge, a place where everyone is homeless; you stay dry from the rain and get away from people looking at you – maybe in surprise.*

The experience I had that day was important on many levels. First, it was important for me to acknowledge the diversity among Oahu's homeless population. Second, it was educational to get out of the shelter and see where some of the shelter residents had come from. Working there sometimes made me forget the transition between living on the streets, being a shelter resident and getting into permanent housing.

Why is it important to recognize the difficulties defining and being defined as homeless? It is important for my analysis to review the implications that such a definition might have not only personally but also socially. How others define homelessness and how people in that situation identify with it says something about our ideas about homelessness. It draws the lines connecting terms such as stigma, deviance, abjection and respect. These are terms that are not only important in order to understand the difficulties of being classified as homeless, but also terms that explain the incentives for people to act in certain ways. As will be discussed in chapter two, the stigma associated with being homeless has specific consequences for action, where the identified *homeless* act in ways to uphold dignity and self-respect. In Liebow's book, he describes how several of the women at the shelter he studied were having difficulties acquiring jobs because it became known that they were homeless (1993). This implies that your status as such not only affects you personally, but can also stand in the way of your ability to change your life situation. At the shelter where I volunteered the staff were very clear on telling us that we should never approach someone we recognized from the shelter in other arenas and let other people know they were staying there. The shelter also had a

phone desk where it was strictly forbidden to answer by telling the shelter's name or anything that might imply that the person was staying there. They had to simply answer with a polite "Hello" in order to keep the guests' living situation hidden. As will also be touched upon in chapter two, the category of homeless is also of importance because it can be viewed as a way of exercising power in itself. Drawing on Foucault's analysis of the subject and power (1982a), I will elaborate on the need shelter residents had for reworking the identifying with homelessness as a status in order to negotiate power relations.

Homelessness is associated with many negative connotations, and it seems people in general talk about homeless either with a sense of pity or in ways that assume it's "their own fault". Especially this last idea about the homeless population influences and make it much more difficult for persons and families that are homeless to actually get back on track, get permanent housing and good jobs. The homeless are a stigmatized group, because it's often associated with failure to succeed in life and is seen to be an individual flaw rather than a consequence of structural restraints (Goffman, 1986; Lyon-Callo, 2000). In American society in particular where one's expected to be responsible both for own success or failure, homelessness bears witness to the ultimate failure. In chapter two I discuss this further, focusing on how people try and cope with their situation. For now, I wish to further explore the different homeless people I met in order to diversify a field that seems unjustly homogenized.

## Categorizing

When speaking of the diversity of homeless, one is required to come up with ways to categorize the segments. This enables you to see commonalities, to compare and also to see the different challenges faced by the homeless. However, it is not necessarily said how and who to separate. I have chosen to focus on the two different shelters I volunteered at: the men's shelter, where single men and some women resided, and the family shelter, where families with children and single women lived. I will also discuss the unsheltered people we encountered during outreach day, a day devoted to locating and helping homeless that live on the streets.

I have chosen to separate the men's shelter from the family shelter because it turned out to be interesting differences in the ways in which people reworked and upheld dignity and respect based on where they were residing. It is therefore an interesting basis for further analysis in chapter two, and points towards different ways in which people cope with their situation. The two shelters, as well as the unsheltered people we encountered are people who cannot be classified as "real" homeless or not, but people who have different outlooks and perception of the situation they are in. For example, many of the families I spent time with at the shelter would sometimes annoy me in that they seemed to be ungrateful for the help they were getting, complaining about services and never talking to me. During outreach day, however, I met a man who not only thanked us for our services (he received a bag with a few things such as band aid and a plastic cup) but also apologized to us for, in his words, "Being the problem". When we asked him about how he was doing and why he didn't want to come with us to the shelter for some food, a shower and shelter, he replied that he had responsibilities. He pointed towards an

elderly woman in a wheelchair sitting next to him, seemingly lost in her own world.

“Who else will take care of her”, he said. With his few words and politeness this homeless man, looking like the perfect stereotype, had succeeded brilliantly in earning our respect and even admiration.

Another man I met during my fieldwork was seemingly content with his life situation, but unsatisfied with the labelling “homeless”: “See, I don’t see myself as homeless. I’m just houseless, you know. I got everything I need. I just don’t live in a house”. The man, in his twenties, was from mainland USA and had moved to Hawaii a few years ago. I was taking notes and relaxing on the beach after breakfast service when he came up to me and started talking. He asked me about what I was writing on, and I replied honestly and told him that I was currently volunteering at a shelter, looking at the many problems causing and associated with homelessness. He immediately told me that he, too, was what “other people” would consider homeless, but that such a word didn’t suit him. Although I never heard others speaking of being without permanent housing as being “houseless”, his discontent with the term homeless implies that he wanted to remove himself from the laden word. Home is more than a house, and in his opinion, he had the other components associated with home such as belonging, familiarity and a sense of being safe. I will now proceed with explaining the locality of my fieldwork – the shelters, followed by an account for those residing there.

### **The Family Shelter**

The shelter is a huge concrete building with three stories. On the ground floor there is a children’s play room (also the place where after school activities are held), reception,



three offices, a computer room and a garage where people can drop off donations such as clothes, kitchen supplies and the like. The computer room would remain mostly unused throughout my stay at the shelter from all I could observe. Meant as a service for people who wanted to look for employment or other necessary activities, I was surprised to only on one occasion actually *see* someone being in there. The children's room has air-condition, the only room on this floor equipped with such a luxury. I later experienced the sometimes-troubling temperature changes between the other rooms, outdoors and the children's room, making it almost impossible to plan out an outfit that would be remotely comfortable in either place.

The children's room is an open, square room with a blackboard and TV, lots of toys and a big table for the kids to do their homework. The chairs were all different, and not meant for a small 6 year-old to sit on by a massive wooden table. The room was also equipped with a big fridge where they could store the children's lunch or snack (also provided by the shelter) as well as some basic kitchen utilities. There was no bathroom next to or in the room, so when the kids wanted to use the restroom one of the adults had to take them across the ground floor and use the visitor's toilet. This toilet was usually locked so we had to ask for a key in the reception.

When accessing the shelter one would always have to sign in and have the receptionist unlock the front door. Once inside, the residents would only have one place to go – up. There's an elevator and stairwell as soon as you enter, all other doors (to the children's room, the computer room and the offices on the ground floor) are locked. Only the

narrow hallway is accessible. There is no air condition or ventilation there, making it uncomfortably hot. On each side, next to both the elevator and the stairs, there are pamphlets and brochures as well as a corkboard with information about events, courses, rules and regulations. When learning more about the paper work and the rules at the shelter, I realized just how much these pamphlets and contracts were controlling the residents' lives and days.

The second floor was where the families lived. This was where the showers were, the single women's bedroom and the family room. The women's room was about half the size of the family room and was equipped with bunk beds in order to fit as many women as possible. In the midst of the room there was a fan doing its best – yet failing – to keep the room even mildly cool. The family room is the biggest room in the entire building, and pretty much looks like an improvised village of beds. Most beds are pushed together, making it possible for a family of four, five or six to sleep in what looks like a massive fleet with sheets. There is no storage space, so most belongings are pushed under the beds or put on top of it during the day. Some parents have a twin bed while their kids share bunk beds with siblings or other children - after all, the room is open without any form of separation or privacy anyway. I was later told that the room holds 35 families, and there hasn't been a point in time where there hasn't been a waiting list to get into the shelter. Some families stay there for a month or two, some on a longer basis (usually never more than 12 months at a time, I was told). The family room was usually deserted during the day, but residents had a strict curfew to stick to while being guests. They would be woken up at 6 am every morning and had to be inside (and go to bed) at 10 pm. Considering the extremely bad ventilation, the appearance and the space

available in the room, I cannot say I was surprised to find that no one used the room except when they had to due to curfew.

The third floor was where the Case Management offices were, as well as the eating area and the storage room for donations. If the residents were in need of something (for example a formal dress or a suit for graduation, which a boy requested during my time there) they would have to approach one of the staff. The staff member would then go and check what they had available and then get back to the person requesting something. The room did have a lot of different stuff to offer the guests in need, but I was also told that there was a shortage on all the little things a family starting up a household might need such as glasses, cutlery and the like. One of the few things the shelter actually had turn down was the huge amount of teddy bears and children's toys that they would get. "It always seems like the people donating things think that what we need are toys and teddy bears, not kitchen utilities or things the families actually need", one of the staff members told me. The dining area had round tables, each with about 10 chairs. After having lunch there with the children during Summer Fun I learned that the families do not eat together, but that adults and children are separated. The reason for this is that the children get a slightly different meal than their parents, usually with more vegetables (which the children rarely ate anyway) and sometimes a completely different meal. As with all the other main rooms at the shelter, the dining room was nothing but a big space with chairs and tables. It also had a restroom for the guests to use, and two small sofas next to a bookshelf. The bookshelf had numerous old-looking novels with unknown titles and was left untouched as far as I could observe.

The case management office is where I spent many days reviewing files, talking to staff and also hearing about the troubles the residents that suffered from mental diseases had. There were two main parts of the office, one where they had a reception, offices and a larger room for conferences and meetings, then there was the big room where there were only cubicles separating the six case managers working there on a daily basis. This meant that they could openly converse, and it was common to hear the case managers ask each other for opinions and the like from their desk. It also meant that most conversations between the case manager and the patient had very limited privacy. As with most other rooms at the shelter, the case management office was only open to staff with keys. If you were a resident and needed help from someone at the office, you would always have to knock, wait and tell the receptionist what you wanted help with. The offices were the only other place in the building with air-condition.

On the rooftop on the building the shelter had just started a new project, growing vegetables. It was still being built and planned when I was there, but I was told they were hoping to grow their own vegetables for their guests to enjoy. Since this area was under development, this too was a restricted area for the guests.

### **The people at the shelters – the Family Shelter**

Most of my days were spent volunteering at the family shelter. This was the main base for the case managers, for the different services provided and the children's program.

My first days were spent by helping out in the children's room:

*An open room, messy. Six children are inside, playing and a couple trying to do homework. The leader of the after school program, Angie, walks towards me and gives me a handshake. She is in her forties, has long curly hair, manicured nails and a full body. Two other adults are in the room, mothers of three of the children. None of them get up or even look my way, but I decide to push my shyness aside and walk closer. I get eye contact and a less than friendly nod from one, and a shy smile from the other. They both look to be from either Hawaii or another Pacific island. Both in their early thirties is my guess judging from the age of their children, but they look older. One mother is shorter than me, wears a full-length skirt and, as I would later find out, speaks poor English. The other one is about my height but probably double my weight. She wears comfortable, big pants and a t-shirt. I feel young, over dressed, uncomfortable and extremely white. Most of all, I feel very Norwegian. And I wished I had been smart enough to leave my pearl earrings at home.*

*The only time she spoke to me was when I had her daughter on my lap. Her daughter, aged 7, was making funny faces, pulling her cheeks and sticking out her tongue. As telling her not to do it seemed to have no effect, I decided to take a different approach. I smiled at her, and softly told her that no one with such a beautiful face should make faces. The little girl didn't seem to care too much and simply started playing with the other kids. Her mother, on the other hand, looked straight at me and gave me a smile as she said "Thank you". I gave an insecure smile in return, baffled by her sudden response. In my mind I was hoping this episode was a way of breaking the ice and make it possible for me to talk to her in the*

*future. For a moment, I thought I had experienced what Geertz did when running from the police in Bali after an illegal cockfight. I was wrong.*

As the preceding paragraphs taken from my fieldnotes show, it was also the location where I had the greatest difficulty talking to the residents and building relations. Luckily, the family shelter had plenty of staff members that were willing to share experiences and stories, and it was also here that I met Kekoa, the leader of the case management program. He proved an important informant not only because he was extremely knowledgeable about what was going on at the family shelter, but also because he himself was of Hawaiian and Chinese origin. This is a vulnerable segment of the population when concerning crime, unemployment and poverty (Dudley and Agard, 1990). As will be elaborated upon, ethnic background is of relevance when looking at the homeless at the shelter where I worked.

## **Families**

One of the main reasons this fieldwork got me so interested was the number of families residing at the shelter. About 35 families stayed there at all times, and I was told that there were always families on waiting list to get in. Almost all families were either Hawaiian or from another Pacific Island. Only one boy and his parents was Caucasian, and two families were African-American. The families I encountered at the shelter usually had two children or more, most of whom were under the age of ten. I learned that most of the families, however, had never lived on the streets but had become homeless due to (most frequently) an economic crisis, loss of job or increased rent. And so many had been forced to live with relatives or friends for a short amount of time

while waiting to get into the shelter. However, I am convinced that some families had been at some point forced to sleep outside, based on own observations. It also didn't seem to make sense that so many of the families had migrated from other islands, not necessarily having a network of neither friends nor relatives. Who would they have stayed with? I met one such family outside the shelter, just across the street:

*I felt uncomfortable unlocking my moped right next to the sleeping child. I didn't want to awaken her, and I was even more nervous I would lose balance and the moped would fall to the ground. The parents didn't seem too worried and didn't move an inch, but looked at me and asked me in poor English if I knew what it was like in the shelter. I replied that the shelter was a good and safe place to be, that they had many services to offer and a safe place to keep their kids. The father's eyes seemed to examine me while I spoke, making me feel even more awkward. When he didn't say anything back, I started rolling my moped backwards, carefully off the curb so I didn't hit their belongings. As I said bye, the man asked me if I was staying at the shelter. Puzzled by his question, I quickly said no but that I volunteered there. He gave me a nod and I drove off.*

As mentioned, the staff told me that families rarely, if ever, stayed on the streets on Oahu. Kekoa told me that most of the "real" homeless, meaning the stereotype looking unsheltered ones, are single men and women. Yet there are families who have been evicted and have no place to go, so now and then they are forced out on the streets unless they can get temporary housing with friends or family. The family I encountered on the curb just across the street from the family shelter was one of them, having no one

to turn to except there. Maybe they had been staying at someone's house and then been forced to leave because of threats of eviction. Another case manager, Milo, told me that the differences in ways of living and housing that many Pacific Islanders were used to compared to US laws often caused problems. Not only was it problematic for the families that were asking for shelter by family and friends, but also for the families that let them in and got in trouble when their landlord discovered they were too many living in one household. Whatever the reason, the little family I spoke to seemed to have nowhere else to go. I saw them sit in the same spot for a few days before I left Oahu, and my guess is that they were waiting for an available bed at the shelter. The fact that the man spoke such poor English along with their physical appearance also made me draw the conclusion that they too were Marshallese and perhaps had come alone to Hawaii in search of a better life. The father's questions and probing eyes could also have been a token of his insecurity with regards to the shelter itself. No doubt taking the final step into a homeless shelter does something to you – you step into an identity that is difficult to accept both for the person in question and society as a whole. As discussed, homeless is not something objectively defined by most, but it will be a status associated with defeat and shame. These are heavy stones on a man's feet as he walks through the doors where he and his family will receive help, but not without paying the price of dignity. Chapter two offers an in-depth analysis of this.

### **The single women**

Perhaps the most difficult segment for me to observe and gain access to were the women at the family shelter. The women were of all ages, and I saw women looking to be in their early twenties to in their seventies. Their reasons for residing at the shelter



also differed. The case managers told me that some seek refuge from violent families or boyfriends, some have run away from home, and some have been abandoned by their families because of mental illness. Shauna, an African-American woman in her twenties, was one of the few single women I met on a regular basis. That was because her young son, aged two, often came to the children's room. She was quiet, and I don't think I ever saw her smile. In fact, the only time I ever saw her express any emotions at all was when her son fell over and cut his lip. He screamed out in pain and screamed even louder when he saw that he was bleeding. Shauna looked terrified and naturally got very upset. Other than this episode, however, she would almost seem like she wasn't even there. She (as with most of the other women at the shelter) barely recognised my presence and would never greet me or the other volunteers.

Another woman, Kayla, was easier to talk to. In fact, she seemed very eager to talk to me, tell stories and let me in on her plans for the future. On numerous occasions, she told me about her plans to take friends out for dinner, to go to the movies or what presents to get her friends for birthdays. Her plan to buy a computer was also a hot topic, and she seemed eager to hear my opinion on what model to get etcetera. It didn't take long before I understood that Kayla was special, in the sense that she had trouble spelling, reading and seemed to be more of a child trapped in the body of a woman in her late twenties. Kayla would join summer fun and help out in the children's room when she could, but I strongly believe she was just as much part of the group of children as she was part of the adults supervising. She always seemed to be in a very good mood, and the smallest things would make her laugh along with the kids. I was unsure how and exactly what to ask the question if she was there as a supervisor or more to be

supervised, but I got my answer when Summer Fun started. We were all divided into groups with one adult, except the group I was leading, where Kayla also attended. I'm assuming she was put in my group also because she showed much interest in talking to me and telling me all her plans. She would often talk about how she was saving up for a new computer and what she had planned for friends' birthdays. Kayla would always offer a smile to the other residents, the volunteers and to the children, so I could not hide my surprise when I later found out why she was a resident at the shelter. Kekoa gave me full access to the files at the case management office, and I felt extra curious when sorting out Kayla's file. Although it posed ethical concerns to me personally – I had come to know Kayla and felt that she saw me as more of a friend than just a volunteer, my curiosity won, paired up with my eagerness to understand the differing reasons to homelessness. In the file, I found out that Kayla did indeed suffer from a small brain dysfunction causing her to be “slow” and have a hard time with reading and the like. This information made complete sense to me, but what was surprising was that Kayla also struggled with anxiety, depression and that she was suicidal.

Kayla serves as a good example to a case where the United States health services have failed. She was homeless because she is unable to get or keep a job, because she has trouble managing money and sometimes herself. The staff at the case management office elaborated on her situation and said she was a typical case where no one (meaning government, health facilities or the like) would take responsibility for her. Since she both struggled with mental disability and psychological issues, it was difficult to figure out where she should receive help from, as she would require assistance in many areas. When asking about her family, I was told that, unfortunately, the case with many of

those who struggle mentally is the same as with the ones who struggle with addiction: the families have simply had enough or don't have neither the means nor time and strength to help their loved ones. Some, of course, might simply not have family living in the same area or even country, and some have left their families while young and rebellious. The subject is very touchy because reasons can be very complicated. Kekoa informed me that it is very dangerous to pass judgment on families where for example parents seem to have abandoned or given up on their children because you never know how much they've tried or sacrificed, and in some cases been forced to leave due to other children in the household. In cases where young adults had lost contact with their family it was not uncommon that it was due to drug abuse that eventually put the family at risk or in a bad social environment. Kekoa himself left his neighborhood and family to join the navy at a young age, a choice he told me was the major reason he hadn't ended up as one of the many poor, criminal high school drop-outs so often found in the part of the island he came from.

Other single women at the shelter were sometimes severely mentally ill. Knowing the content of the files, I became very aware of the magnitude of some of the psychological problems some residents had. Working at the office where they would come in and out for consultation also provided me with insight into the everyday issues that these women were facing. Simple things like having set shower times could become a huge obstacle for some. One of the residents, who was diagnosed with severe paranoid schizophrenia, expressed her fear of being watched and controlled by staff at the shelter because she had to shower at a set time. During the fieldwork I observed women sitting outside the shelter, talking to themselves and sometimes having loud outbursts. In the

office, women sometimes came by to ask for more money or even just to have a chat with the case managers about how they felt afraid of other residents, bacteria in their food and express their concerns about their future prospects. Rumors about poisoned food were set out, which was made clear when we went on our outreach day project. “They make you eat the food, and it makes you sick. I’ve heard many people say they would never get sick from eating food until they came to the shelter and got food from there”, one man told us when we asked him why he didn’t want to come stay at the shelter.

I was told that, in general, the single women who lived at the family shelter were only residents for a shorter amount of time. By this the staff meant 2-3 months, yet I did see some inconsistency between what was said and what the records showed. Even though the case managers said the families and women usually spent less than four months there, I encountered families who were spending their second year at the shelter. Some residents had also come back after being in public housing and losing it due to loss of job or failing to comply with rules I was told when asking an assistant at the case management office about this. They were allowed to stay at the family shelter because they complied with rules and didn’t use drugs or alcohol. This, in turn, meant that they would probably also be able to comply with the rules and regulations set out by public housing and that they had greater chances of obtaining a job. The consequence of their temporary stay was that they seemed to avoid affiliation with the shelter, shelter staff and volunteers. I hardly ever saw the women engaging in conversations with one another, and they mastered the skill of avoiding conversations with me. In general, they were removing themselves from all activities and relations tying them closer to the

shelter and being homeless. For an example, I never saw residents spending time inside the shelter unless meals were served or due to curfew.

### **The children**

As a source of information, the children proved very helpful. Not only because they were more trusting and open towards me than the adults, but also because actions and their behavior were telling. Throughout the days at the shelter there was information and observations to be found in the way they acted towards me, each other, games they liked playing and the dreams they had. Expressing themselves through drawings also made me realize the many concerns they had, and how the lifestyle they are being forced to have due to various reasons impacts their social and academic life. Drawings consistently being made were of their families in houses or castles, not once did I see anyone draw kittens or rainbows. Perhaps coincidental, but seeing that they were in a situation where much talk and concern is getting into permanent housing, I do not think the children's preoccupation with drawing this was coincidental. Varying from 10-30 kids, I also got the chance to realize how big the problem of homelessness is on Oahu. Most days there were about ten kids, but during Summer Fun the number was usually about 20, sometimes more. It was also through interacting with the kids I got a better understanding of the frustrations associated with staying at the shelter as well as the problems that come with being homeless. If it hadn't been for my time with the children, I would also have believed that most residents only stayed for a month or two – based on what shelter staff told me. However, learning that some children were joining Summer Fun for the second time made it clear that, even if most families only stay for a short period of time, some spend up to a year or more at the shelter.

Every afternoon the kids would come to the children's room for a snack, games and help with their schoolwork. Every afternoon I would be astonished at how poorly the children were doing in school, how their homework seemed an impossible task for so many. I took special notice in a girl who said she liked school. She was bright and rarely needed help with her homework, which she gladly did. On average, there were about ten kids attending the homework club, as Angie, the manager of the children's activities called it, and although some kids were there more often than others, the total number of children I met during this time would have been about 20. Of these, only that one girl seemed interested in doing her homework. Perhaps biased by my own experience of the first years of school, I was surprised to find that so many seemed to find school and homework nothing but boring. Getting the kids to sit down and open their books was always problematic, and with all of them in great need for help it took hours to get them all to finish. Eventually, it usually ended up with me or another volunteer letting them know the answers and at least try to make them write them down themselves.

To describe the homework club in one word is easy: frustrating. Not just because the kids were unruly and loud, but because they were so far behind in everything school related. One episode illustrates the severity of their lagging behind: I was helping a 7-year old girl with her homework. The task was to read a small book and then write down what it was about and make a drawing to fit the outline. The little girl I was trying to help was one of the quieter kids who always listened and was very well behaved. Regardless, when she was doing her homework, she didn't stand a chance. The task was based on reading a short story, but the girl lacked the ability to read. I tried showing her some words and saying them with her, but it seemed she had no idea how to decipher

the letters on the page. This episode was not unique, and is very telling because she not only struggled with the task itself but completely lacked the ability to do it no matter how hard or how long she would have attempted to. She lacked the basic knowledge that was required to do the task, knowledge that other kids her age was meant to have. During the weeks of Summer Fun we were also assigned to do different indoor tasks that required reading and writing. However good the intention might have been, the constant shortcomings some of the children must have felt for not being able to complete the task probably increased their impatience and misbehavior. I observed that the children, in general, were able to focus more and be quieter when assigned simpler tasks that they could master. Being the leader of a group of children (six children in total) I experienced an immense feeling of failure when no one could or would even try to cooperate and write down the sentences we were asked to. In the end, the result was that I had to write down the sentences simply so we could finish in time for lunch. By then we had had about a dozen timeouts<sup>1</sup>, threatening to get parents, telling the children they would not be able to join the rest of Summer Fun and actually sending a child off to his parents because he couldn't take directions. During Summer Fun activities there were more children than those attending after school services, and on some days they were up to 30 kids joining.

### **Homelessness has no age limit**

I was made painfully aware that not only do the children struggle with their situation as such, but also that some of the children had issues regarding being classified as just that

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<sup>1</sup> Timeouts was the most common form of disciplining the children, usually followed by the threat of having to go back to their parents and spend time inside the shelter main family room.

– children. For practical reasons the shelter distinguishes between families, single women, single men and the children in families. However, this categorisation puts all under the age of 18 in the same category, which can become very problematic. An account made by Brian, a 16 year old boy living at the shelter with his mother and younger sisters aged three and six, exemplifies the difficulties emerging from this clear cut categorization. He was asked to write a letter explaining why he should be able to join in on Summer Fun after he had been acting up.

*"I'm not a little kid. I feel like everyone's treating me like one, I have no responsibilities and I only hang out with kids here. So I just act like a kid, but I know I can be more grown up. "It's just hard [...] I wanna change and be better cause I want Summer Fun to continue. It's fun, and we get to go other places than just staying here, where we spend way too much time. It's boring, and Summer Fun at least gets us outta here and do stuff".*

A shelter for the homeless has no age limits. Yet from what I experienced most people living there (both at the family shelter and the men's shelter) were either aged 18 and up or children under the age of ten. I therefore felt for Brian, a boy aged 16, who stayed there with his single mom and two sisters aged 3 and 6. During my days in the after school program he would have good and bad days. Some days he could not be bothered talking to anyone, didn't want to listen or do any of the activities organized with the other kids. Other days he would laugh and take on more of a big brother-role with the children. And some days, he would express sadness and frustration because he simply didn't want to be there, yet had no other alternatives. His motivation to follow rules and play with the other kids was depending on thinking about what the other options is, namely hanging out in the overheated family room or sit outside the shelter with other residents, all of whom were quite a few years older than him. On the day he said this, he



and the other children who could write had been assigned to write a page explaining why they wanted to join Summer Fun, the shelter's summer activity program for the kids. He stood up and read his page without noticing the kids that were not paying attention, one of the "troublemakers" laughing and some continuing writing on their own story. What I wrote here is just an excerpt, but his meaning is clear. Brian kept reading although his voice was about to crack a couple of times – the 16 year old boy was very emotional when telling the story, and so was I. My initial thoughts about Brian were that he should set an example for the kids and stop acting so childish. It wasn't until this day I really started thinking about how it must feel for a young adult to be alone with so many kids, to live at the shelter. He was being treated like a child, and therefore decided to act like one. I was terrified that his behavior might compromise his participation in Summer Fun because that would mean more hours alone with his mother and siblings without having anyone else to talk to. It would mean more boredom – a known issue to many who reside at shelters (Liebow, 1993:29). Brian was still categorized as child and was therefore also sharing beds with his family. Another thing with shelter rules I knew was bothering him was that the children always had to be escorted to the restroom if they had to go – him included. More than once he groaned and said, clearly annoyed: "Oh, come on, I'm not a little kid!" when someone had to go with him across the hall to the restroom. Personally, I felt more than a little bothered when I had to go with him, especially since people I encountered at the shelter usually thought I was younger than my then 24 years.

In Brian's case his sometimes extremely childish behavior and frustration might have been caused not only by the difficult situation he and his family was in, but also the

living conditions at the shelter. His willingness to join the Summer Fun program was amplified because of the overhanging threat of staying inside at the shelter the whole summer. Perhaps the rules and regulations the shelter demanded from its guests made him feel even more like a child than what having some sort of freedom and ability to leave with the younger children did. As Hoffman and Coffey observes, many of the people receiving services from homeless shelters feel as if they are being infantilized by the staff (2008). Being put in the category of children definitely increases the feeling of being treated like a child, and in Brian's case this came at a time when he is trying to become an adult. No matter how much the shelter tries to facilitate to the needs of the residents, organizing people based on age, gender and so forth impacts the guests.

### **The Men's shelter**

So far I have focused mainly on the family shelter. I have chosen to do so because this is where I would find most of the homeless residents that were so interesting to me because they didn't fit my ideas of a homeless person, and also because the family shelter was more organised around different activities and courses and not just being a shelter per se. Still, I spent quite a few days at the men's shelter too, where I volunteered in the kitchen for breakfast service. It was also where the outreach program had its base.

The men's shelter is much more like one would imagine a shelter to be like: a simple brick building, a big dormitory with thin foldout mattresses and no other amenities. At the door I had to show my ID and, as always, sign in and out with full name and leave my ID for them to keep until I left later in the morning. The men's shelter is only a couple of blocks from the family shelter, but seems far removed from the more lively family

shelter. The residents at the men's shelter only come there in the evenings to pull out their mats on an available floor space, and to gather their belongings after breakfast at 8am. There are no activities, courses or computer rooms. There's just the big open space where the lucky ones who get a spot can sleep without being afraid of someone hurting them or of the sometimes-capricious Hawaiian tropical weather. The building lies close to a huge Costco<sup>2</sup>, so after 8am the traffic around the area picks up. On the back side of the building you're only 30 metres from the busy highway, and if you walk down the road from the building's entrance you'll find yourself in the middle of the busy Chinatown area, directly next to the financial district with its countless Starbucks' and skyscrapers. Nevertheless, the men's shelter seems secluded and off the map, as if an area one tries to avoid. Driving around the area on my moped, I kept feeling like the small street leading to the shelter was almost off limits, like an ignored beggar on the sidewalk that never meets a by passer's eyes.

## **The men**

Experiencing and dealing with homelessness is individual, yet there were some commonalities I could see when working with the men and the women. As already touched upon, the men (especially the unsheltered we met) seemed to have a very different attitude towards me and other staff than the women I met at the family shelter. To explain these differences, we need to dive deeper into the ocean of reasons for homelessness and the way out of it. First, let me account for who the men are that stay at the shelter.

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<sup>2</sup> Costco is a massive warehouse chain that sells everything from electronics to food.

During my months volunteering at the shelter, I got the chance to see how many different people walk in and out of there. Every morning at breakfast time at the men's shelter I would encounter men looking like the perfect homeless, with rugged clothes and un-groomed. Yet I would also see the occasional man going to work after breakfast, wearing his khaki pants and a typical short-sleeved Hawaii shirt. Some were young, aged about 20, and some looked up to the age of about 60. Shared, however, was the politeness and gratefulness they showed me and the other volunteers when served food. In addition, after my finished breakfast service I was usually thanked or engaged in conversation when leaving the shelter. Some asked me where I was from, others wondered if maybe I wanted their number. Either way, I was seen and treated as present, something that rarely happened at the family shelter (by the mothers, not children).

The men and few women that used the services provided by the men's shelter were in need for assistance for different reasons. I was told by the manager there that some that came for breakfast weren't even homeless, but came to get a free meal or two when they were short of money. This explained the men I saw looking everything but homeless, on their way to work. In addition, the number of people coming in for breakfast and other meals was rising with the amount of days since wages had been paid. If anything, this tells us something about the discrepancy between living costs and wages on Oahu. Other men spent nights now and then just to feel safe and avoid the street, sometimes the bad weather. Yet the number of men coming for breakfast and other meals far outnumbered

the men that actually slept there, partly due to the limited sleeping space, part because they preferred staying where they had full control and some privacy, the latter being hard to come by at the men's shelter.

The sleeping area inside the men's shelter was simply an open room with thin mattresses. Upon arrival for breakfast service, I had to walk straight across the dormitory in order to get to the kitchen. If anything met my expectations regarding what homeless was supposed to smell like – the dormitory surely didn't let me down. The mattresses were lined up closely with about 20-30 cm to spare on each side. The room was quite big and open, yet had no ventilation. Combined with about 20 men that had very limited access to showers, the smell threw me off. After my first visit there, I made sure to take a deep breath before entering – only to take the next one when safely inside the kitchen. The building itself was two stories; the ground floor was where the kitchen and dormitory was, along with a few offices for the staff. The second floor was for offices and also had a sleeping hall. The manager at the men's shelter told me his plan was to get bunk beds on the second floor, so that the beds would be more permanent and so that the shelter could house more people than it did today. There were always people they had to deny shelter due to the limited space and mattresses.

### **Comparing the two shelters – moving on or ameliorating**

The men's shelter differed from the family shelter in many ways. First of all, the shelter had fewer rules, but also fewer services. All courses and access to computers, counseling

and facilities such as books and being allowed inside except sleeping hours and meals were at the family shelter, not the men's shelter. The men's shelter was indeed just a place for people to sleep and to get meals. With fewer services, however, came fewer rules. Even though the door was guarded and there were strict times for meals and access, one did not have to show up sober or without signs of being affected by drugs or the like, so long as one wasn't considered a risk to the other residents. That was also the reasons why some guests were female; they did not want to or was unable to comply with family shelter rules, but were welcome at the men's shelter. There was a definite majority of men there, though, and I was to learn some of the difficulties associated with the mixed gender shelter. At a meeting with all the case managers, they were discussing a woman that used to come to the men's shelter. She was a drug addict, but the problem didn't lie there. I was told that she was now trying to support her addiction by selling the one of the few things she owned: her body. This created a difficult situation, as prostitution is illegal and the shelter staff was worried that diseases would spread. In the end, the woman was denied access to all shelter facilities until further notice.

Although the woman in question was denied access, most homeless were allowed into the men's shelter. You did not have to be a registered guest, and it was run by a first come first serve policy. I was told that in general, the men's shelter was more like the majority of shelters on Oahu in that its focus was to make days and lives easier for the homeless population, but not aimed at "curing" homelessness – getting the users into permanent housing. This distinction is of great importance, not only as a practical fact. In hindsight, I see how the difference between the ideologies at the family and men's shelter affected the ways in which people experienced their situation and their ways of

coping with it. In chapter two I discuss this further, pointing to the ways in which people utilize their different means of upholding dignity and making heavier their side of the scale of power. The majority of the residents at the men's shelter, I was told, were men and women who were unable to follow the rules of sobriety that came with the family shelter and permanent housing. It was therefore a close to impossible task to get them into treatment programs, and what the shelter could offer was a safe place to sleep and a full stomach. In contrast to the family shelter, where residents were set at leaving as soon as possible to something better, the men's shelter *served as* the better alternative. As a relief from hunger and sleeping outside the men's shelter was experienced as a good for the guests, whereas the family shelter was seen as a necessary yet inconvenient step on the way to better living conditions. Rather than trying to escape the reality of the shelter, as many seemed to do at the family shelter, the men's shelter guests made sure to be polite and appreciative in order to stay on the staff's good side.

Comparing the two shelters as two independent institutions is relevant because they do not serve the same purpose. There were some men who were hoping to, and probably would, obtain permanent housing. Yet, even if they were receiving counselling, this was done at the family shelter offices. The main purpose for the men's shelter would therefore regardless be the elementary needs of shelter and meals, not services beyond that. The whole image of the men's shelter was therefore affected and made into something slightly different than the family shelter. Even if it was transitory for some users, the men's shelter was primarily a space for amelioration of the day to day lives of the homeless population. The family shelter can be seen as more of an imposed necessity on the road towards a higher goal.

## **The diversity**

Although the preceding paragraphs deal with the main groups of people using the shelters, the field needs to be further diversified. I have already mentioned that the diversity was great at the men's shelter, not only compared to the residents at the family shelter, but also within. For example, you would encounter the man in need for a free meal but who had an own place to live and a job. Another person sleeping there could be a mentally ill woman, perhaps using drugs for self-medication. Some were alcoholics, some might be veterans, and some were ex-convicts, leaving prison only to find oneself alone and on the street. The latter group is another example of a segment of the population that easily falls out of the system, a typical precarious part of the population. Attending a group meeting for some of these men, I realized the many difficulties people who have recently come out of jail face. One of the men attending the meeting said he was staying at the shelter to avoid "bad company" and some of his old "friends". He expressed fear that if he was to obtain permanent housing, someone would find out where he lived and try to get him to commit other crimes.

## **Where do the homeless come from?**

During my fieldwork, I was struck by the over representation of Hawaiian or Pacific Island-looking residents. Not only were there more Polynesian-looking men at the men's shelter, but there were markedly more Hawaiians, Samoans and Marshallese people at the family shelter as well. Of the about 35 families at the shelter, only three were either Caucasian or African American. When asked about it, Kekoa replied that many of the people living at the shelter had migrated from other islands in search of "The American Dream", only to find unemployment and homelessness. In his words, "The story of Hawaii post-contact is a story about homelessness". He saw a clear connection between



the historical events taken place on the island – from Captain Cook’s arrival in 1778, privatizing the land and eventually becoming USA’s 50<sup>th</sup> state in 1959, and today’s situation for many native Hawaiians. In addition, USA’s involvement and use of Pacific Islands such as the Marshall Islands has led to numerous immigrants from these areas. Not having education or special expertise in needed areas, these migrants stand little to no chance in obtaining jobs that pay well enough to cover Oahu’s pricy apartments.

Oahu is a well-known tourist destination. The contrast between the shelter and the nearby areas is striking. In miles, however, the two locations are very close. A ten minute ride on my moped took me from my apartment located at the end of Waikiki beach to the shelter, yet the surroundings were very different. The residents at the shelter were constantly reminded of the life the *others* on the island lived, a life far from their own yet located right next door. Social differences are made extremely explicit in a place like this. When working at the case management office, I asked Kekoa about the difficulties the residents had saving up money, their spending money on things such as takeout food and new clothes. I was sometimes surprised at seeing the new clothes and Justin Bieber t-shirts the kids showed up in, when their family was in such a precarious position. Kekoa replied that what I had to remember was their background, coming from Pacific Islands where goods such as that could be difficult to obtain. In addition, he said, most “Have never felt as poor as when they came here. They (the immigrants living at the shelter) have come from places where *everyone’s* poor, to a place where they are noticeably different”. With this in mind I found it easier to understand the spending of money, not just because they could, but also because it was a way to fit in, to decrease the gap between themselves and the remaining population on Oahu.

### Some thoughts on causes

Recognizing diversity within the easily generalized group of homeless also calls for reflections on reasons for homelessness. As I have already mentioned, residents have differing causes leading to their situation. However, what struck me as most surprising was the majority of people who simply couldn't afford housing. These were the people who were in insecure jobs, who had to live from one monthly paycheck to the other. This is the group of people known as the precariat, and they are recognized as having "[...] a more restricted range of social, cultural, political and economic rights than citizens around them" (Standing, 2011). The families living at the shelter are, for the most part, members of this social group, having to resort to the shelter when rent costs increased, or a child got sick. I was told on numerous occasions that the inhabitants of Oahu, unless well off, are becoming more and more vulnerable to the same fate, that is, moving into a shelter. Kekoa, after hearing about my family history, had no reservations when he uttered: "So, if you had been born in Hawaii, you'd live in the ghetto". He based his statement on what would be reality if my family were Hawaiian. There would be no welfare system to keep us in permanent housing, no free healthcare and no standardized income to keep us afloat. In short, the Norwegian welfare state is what keeps part of the population from becoming what Standing (2014) defines as the precariat. As prices on Oahu have increased steadily over the years, income has not followed, I was told. Taking notice on the price difference from 2011 to 2013, I have no problems following Kekoa in his statements.

This chapter started out with a short introduction describing how homelessness can be seen as a symptom of social factors sometimes out of the person's control. Reviewing the

heterogeneity of the homeless population on Oahu bears witness to this. Yes, some individuals have made bad choices, committed crimes, done drugs. Yet, as I hope to have shed light on, many are simply what we would call unfortunate. The families I met were neither criminals nor drug addicts. They were people who had lost their jobs, who were unable to pay rent, mothers who had escaped abusive husbands. Some were mentally ill. Those who had made mistakes in their lives had nowhere to turn but to the shelter, as for example the ex-convicts. I started off this chapter describing homelessness as a symptom because it makes it a term that doesn't necessarily tie the person in question to some kind of determinist way of thinking. As with a disease, everyone can get it, no matter how healthy your lifestyle is. And as with a disease, the symptoms can sometimes be worse than the disease itself. For symptoms become the physical manifestation of a disease, whereas the body or mind is seen as the weak part. Your cough is what people turn away from, not the cold. In the same way, people don't judge or turn you away because rent costs are high, but because you ended up as homeless. I have described the variation of people because they are subject to stigmatization based on not having a home. Being homeless can definitely be seen in coherence with bad choices. That doesn't mean, however, that it has to be. What is inevitable, on the other hand, are the negative connotations connected to homelessness. And as a result, the homeless people themselves try to lay strategies in order to break from these connotations and from the shelter they are guests at. How and in what ways the different people using shelter facilities do this creates the framework for the next chapter

# Chapter 2

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## Shelterization and Strategies

*Another bright and sunny day in Waikiki. I'm anxious to get to the shelter and get my fieldwork started. Driving through the streets I pass self-made tents made of cardboard and plastic, a few restaurants and the huge Ala Moana mall, which draws hundreds of eager shoppers every day. After struggling a bit with Hawaiian traffic and with figuring out where to go I pull up with my moped next to a big concrete building. I'm here.*

*I'm way early, and as I sit outside the shelter entrance I decide to do what anthropologists do best: observe. It's busy outside the shelter. After waiting in line to speak to the lady in the reception of the center, through a Plexiglas window (like the ones at subway stations) I am told to sit down and wait for my contact person, Angie, who is responsible for the after school program and other activities with the kids staying there. The area is busy and I hear women talking, laughing and sometimes yelling at their children running around or being loud. Many speak in a language I don't know or even recognize. They look well dressed and "normal" – nothing like the people I've seen walking the streets of Honolulu and in Waikiki. Some wear beautiful long skirts underneath their American style t-shirts and tops. The shelter is only a 10-minute drive from famous and bustling Waikiki beach area. An old woman gets help from someone wearing a shelter staff t-shirt. She looks very old and frail, and her belongings are tucked into her wheelchair which works more as a storage room on wheels than a place for her to rest her tired legs.*

*After about five minutes the first white woman I've seen arrives. There has been between 10-15 people walking or sitting around the entrance of the shelter, and the lady stands out simply because she's white. The women I've seen wearing "Staff" t-shirts are also non-whites, looking Hawaiian or from one of the other Pacific islands. The staff walks around, occasionally answering questions. The lady in reception answers phone calls and helps the people in line. I can't hear everything they're saying, but I understand that some are asking to use the phone; some want to schedule meetings with someone and some simply seem to have a question. The lady smiles and seems to treat every person with politeness and a smile, as she did me when I first arrived. While I sit there, I cannot help but feel out of place and I become extremely aware of my own appearance. I feel too young, too white and too naïve to be here, yet the faces I meet seem to either not care that I'm there or simply give me a vague smile as to acknowledge that I am. Most of the people walking around and hanging out outside the shelter entrance look as if they're in their mid-thirties. There are seven kids there, accompanied by what I am assuming are their mothers. A man comes towards the shelter, pushing a pram with an about 2-year old girl. I can't help but wonder what he's feeling as he walks closer to the shelter, is it a feeling of despair or relief that there's help? I don't get more time to ponder as I'm being called by one of the staff – Angie's here to see me.*

This chapter aims at analyzing the different ways in which shelter life influences the people residing at the shelter. It sheds light on the ways in which restrictions and rules, be it from written pamphlets or closed doors, have effects on the guests and the way

they use the shelter property. I will also discuss what strategies people utilize in order to uphold dignity and a sense of autonomy in an environment where doing so is challenging.

### **The shelters: heterotopic spaces**

The shelter can be said to be what Foucault defines as a heterotopic space (1984). Not only is it a space set aside from other spaces, it is also transitional in that it is used by residents as a temporary place to reside before (preferably) moving out. As I have already explained, the shelter is also in accordance with Foucault's 5<sup>th</sup> principle of heterotopias in that it is a space that "[...] presuppose a system of opening and closing [and where] the entry is compulsory, as in the case of entering a barracks or a prison, or else the individual has to submit to rites and purifications" (1984:7). Both shelters require that you ask and wait for permission to enter. There is also the curfew, forcing residents to be inside at a certain time. In addition, a number of behaviors are prohibited. At the family shelter, you are not allowed to show any signs of being under the influence of alcohol or other drugs. You have to sit down during meals; you are not allowed to walk about freely in a number of areas. The rites and purifications Foucault explores can be seen as the contracts signed and general demands for personal hygiene and staying sober found especially enforced at the family shelter. When entering the family shelter, you have to register and sign contracts that effectively give shelter staff control over your financials, over your personal information, medical history, and perhaps most valuable: your time. Daily routines are set by the shelter, through set meal times, curfew and compulsory activities. In addition, the shelters serve as a place for those who are considered deviants. Closely related to Goffman's notion of stigma, the heterotopic space houses people who are considered deviant because of the situation

they are in. When Foucault discusses heterotopia of deviation, he explains it as a place where individuals who don't comply with the society's required norm reside, such as a rest home. The homeless shelters can also be defined as such because, as he argues with regards to the elderly in retirement homes, " [...] leisure is the rule, idleness is a sort of deviation" (Foucault, 1984:5). Connecting the heterotopic space of Foucault to Goffman then, it is easy to draw lines between Goffman's definitions of stigma as seen as blemishes on individual character – exemplified by the failure to obtain permanent housing – and the ways the shelter is a vivid example of a heterotopic space (Goffman, 1986; Foucault, 1984).

The shelter as an institution can also be viewed as serving a purpose for the rest of the population. It is an institution meant to keep a part of the population separated from the rest. It is needed, of course, for the homeless people to have a place to sleep at night and get their meals. Yet it is also a form of gathering a stigmatized group into a location where they stay to "be cured" of their situation, while being securely separated from the remaining people of Oahu. As a telling case, the shelter has been forced to move its location in the past, due to the inconvenience experienced by shop owners and residents in the area when it was located closer to shopping areas and restaurants. Today, no shops or restaurants lie next to either one of the shelters. In fact, both the men's shelter and the family shelter lie close, yet hidden, from major roads or warehouses. Unless you know where it is, the shelters are hardly even noticeable.

## Abjection

The homeless population experience stigmatization. Your status as homeless is associated with own failure to be a successful citizen, even a person. It is seen as closely intertwined with the individual, as a personal shortcoming (Goffman 1986).

Individualism as an ideology stands strong in the US, and when having to rely on others to help you with what is considered a basic need – a roof over your head, you are viewed as a divergent, you become *the other*. In the same way that Ewing (2008) discusses the way society in Germany view Muslim men as social outcasts, one can write about the homeless of Oahu in a similar fashion. As with the Muslim men, the homeless act as one of the “[...] minorities that do not conform to local cultural expectations [and thus] are also presumed to fall outside what is expected of a citizen” (Ewing, 2008:4). Not only, then, are the homeless seen as failing to succeed in life, but also as failing to comply with the individualistic mentality that is so prevalent in the States, making you a full citizen.

As such, the homeless population can be said to serve a purpose; functioning as an antithesis to what one should be like, they are stigmatized so as to exemplify what the rest of the population is *not*. Kekoa made an interesting point when I asked him about the problem of homelessness and his thoughts on whether or not it could be, as I simplistically put it, solved. His response surprised me; as he went on to say that “Homelessness is a problem that can’t be solved. We can decrease the number of homeless, but not end it. Society needs homeless”. He could barely finish his sentence before someone called him, and I didn’t get the chance to ask him what he meant.

Applying the term *abjection* however, gives meaning to Kekoa’s words and helps explain the stigmatization that the homeless experience. Homeless people on Oahu, I argue, serves as an example of what not to be, what is to be abjected, as a way to identify with something and refraining from something else. Stigmatizing the homeless is, then, a way



of finding out what one is *not*. It is “[...] the process of maintaining a sense of wholeness and identity by casting out that which is felt to be improper” (Ewing, 2008:3). Viewing homelessness and the shelters in this way gives sense to Kekoa’s notion that “We need homeless”. The shelter buildings, working as a heterotopic space to keep *divergents*, become places where the other is to be found, the abjected.

The shelter itself created the framework not only for my fieldwork, but also for my analysis. Rather than being an empty container for residents, it symbolises the restrictions and power imbalance found there. Even its location – and having to move it in the past shows how homelessness is associated with stigma. Far from neutral, locked doors, access to rooms and the difference in rooms symbolise the hierarchy found in social life, both in and outside the walls. In addition, much like Lund’s analysis of places and buildings in Cuzco, Peru, so too does the shelter have an *effect* on its guests (Lund, 2003). The main building described has some underlying meanings and implications which helps illuminate the problems and issues faced by the residents, as well as depict attitudes towards and the power imbalance between “us” and “the others”, here meaning the homeless. The shelter is also an important component in being the symbol of power indifferences residents are faced with. Locked doors, permissions and the feeling of being watched can be compared to Foucault’s famous rendering of Jeremy Bentham’s *Panopticon* (1977). Even though the shelter might not intend to make the residents feel watched over, the fact is that they are. It is, then, a way of disciplining residents, making sure they are inside at a certain time (curfew), eat at set times, and stay away from what is considered an evil such as alcohol. Let us now return to the

shelter and how it plays part in a process I call *shelterizatio*, a term I borrow from Grunberg and Eagle in Marcus (2006).

### Shelterization

The shelter looks very bashful in spite of its big size. Much like the homeless man sitting on a bench at the bus stop, it's simply there without much recognition from by passers. Situated quite close to a main road and other bigger buildings (also a gas station, some stores and a Jack in the Box) it doesn't stand out in any way. The only thing bearing witness to what the building is used for are all the people sitting outside, just talking or watching what the other people are talking about. Every time I arrived at the shelter there would be at least ten people outside the building pretty much doing nothing. It didn't matter what time of the day I showed up, and since the entrance area had a roof the weather didn't really matter much either. I spent quite a lot of time waiting outside the shelter as I was usually early and because I sometimes had to wait for the right person to come out and meet me. The word that usually came to mind when I observed the other people there was boredom. People simply looked bored and uninterested in doing much, either by staring out in front of them or just watching their children walk around. The ones that had a phone would usually play with it, but most of them looked as if they were just waiting for something to happen.

As I have already mentioned, walking in and out of the building would require the person to approach the receptionist and have him or her open the door.

All volunteers and guests would also have to sign in and out, making you feel watched at all times. Curfew rules were very strict, and not following rules could lead to expulsion.

The shelter being, for most, a last resort made disobeying the rules a grave matter.

Once inside the building, the guests are constantly reminded that that's exactly what they are: guests, not home. The pamphlets easily accessible are there to tell them the rules. The locked doors and restricted areas tell them that they cannot walk around freely. In addition, set meal and shower times remind them that even the most basic of human needs are subject to a time schedule not made by themselves. Having to ask permission and sometimes have someone bring a key for using the toilet is another example. I still remember an incidence where a guest had somehow managed to get into the case management office and locked herself in the bathroom. The staff were concerned that she might harm herself or that she wasn't feeling well, but were also very upset that she had broken house rules. I later found out that the woman that had locked herself in the bathroom had done so because she wanted to shower alone and out of the scheduled shower time. I never found out who this lady was, and I never heard the story from her. However, being a guest at the shelter and having to oblige to so many rules and regulations must have played part in her wanting to shower and perhaps feel some sort of control.

Privacy is something the guests have little of. The family rooms are open and your next neighbour is within 1.5 meters of your area, which pretty much only consists of a bed.

You sleep together, eat together, join activities together and even shower together, making it almost impossible to have any alone time. A few of the guests expressed their frustration with the system. One of those having great difficulties accepting the set

shower times was a schizophrenic lady in her thirties, diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia. She was convinced that the Samoan women working at the shelter were spying on her, and so she was scared to undress and be alone with them during shower times. Living under these conditions also affects family life. There are no spaces for family time or even a quiet place to have a conversation between husband and wife. Talking to or reprimanding your child is also done in public, either in front of other parents or the staff. Eating, showering, sleeping, taking courses, joining children's activities – all is done together with the other residents with the supervision of shelter staff. Again, comparing the shelter to the Foucauldian term of the Panopticon is appropriate, because the residents are being watched, at all times (1977). For families and single women, the case managers were also responsible for distributing and saving money for them, money that many of them, I was told, received from social welfare. In short, most aspects of life are being handed over to shelter staff as you take the step into the shelter and sign a contract. It is a two-faced action: it is meant to be a resource for the person in question to become independent, yet is done so by stripping him or her of the individual autonomy they have. Let me now elaborate and explain my use of the word shelterization and show how it can be used as a tool for the purpose of grasping the many challenges shelter residents face.

Grunberg and Eagle (*in* Marcus, 2006) use the term “shelterization” when speaking of the long-term behavioural and psychological effect of being a shelter resident based on an extreme environment characterized by drug abuse, violence and lack of personal grooming (2006:65). However, such a definition doesn't apply to the family shelter where I volunteered. But applying the term to illuminate the ways in which residents are

influenced by simply being in their precarious position and by the many rules and expectations they have to live by prove fruitful. It is a term that sums up the effects shelter life can have. Shelterization entails the feeling of being disenfranchised, stigmatized, the extreme lack of privacy and self-government and the eroding self-esteem that is often related to residing at a shelter. The term is useful because, as will be elaborated upon later, residents actively make choices and strategies to remove themselves from the shelterization process. For now, let me provide empirical examples on how this process of shelterization can be played out.

*A woman in her thirties, Marshallese, was walking into the eating area when her child, aged about 3, started yelling and acting out. After having shushed her child without success, she slapped him on his cheek and he stopped. One of the staff members saw the episode, walked over to the woman and had a quick conversation. As I was standing quite close, I heard the staff telling the Marshallese woman to never do that again and to apologize to her child. The staff member thought she was doing the mom and child a favor by teaching the mother her idea of right upbringing. Yet, what I saw was a mother being deprived of her authority in front of her child. Whether supporting physical punishment or not, what caught my attention and interest was what just happened to the family dynamics the instant the staff member got involved. She also did it in front of the other some 20 people in the eating area as well as in front of the Marshallese woman's other children. The mother complied with the staff and did as she had been told.*

*Brian, a 16 year old boy, seemed to become more frustrated with staying at the shelter with every time I'd see him. He would sigh more often, refuse to take part in games and seem more easily agitated with every passing week. His frustration finally came to a full blowout one day after Summer Fun. As the kids started leaving to go to their parents and then dinner, his mother came to pick him and his two sisters up. The young girls were acting out and teasing their brother, and the mom told him to be the grown up and to get going, when he snapped. He started by yelling at his mom, she answered by yelling back. Curse words were being shouted; I was standing by, shocked and awkward. Brian walked up to his mother, close to her face and pushed her. She answered by pushing him away forcefully, and he hit her in the arm with his fist before running out the door, furious. Brian is big for his age, and his mom is a typically big woman from Samoa. The power of the words and then the violence definitely threw me off, and I was stunned and feeling extremely uncomfortable. His two sisters, however, didn't seem to take the episode too seriously which made me think that this kind of behavior is not uncommon.*

The two episodes described are show how one is forced to display private incidents in public, because the residents are deprived of the luxury of privacy. They are different in that the first episode with the Marshallese woman says something about the ways in which shelter staff is intimately involved in all parts of life. In Brian's case, he not only made public more of a private issue, but also acted out because of the situation he and his family is in. After Brian fled the scene, Angie, the leader of the children's program, approached the mother. She too had witnessed the episode and immediately went up to her and asked how she was doing, and also to hear if this situation had occurred before. Brian's mother explained that it had happened before, but seemed reluctant to

elaborate. They seemed to become aware that I was still there and my felt level of awkwardness shoot through the roof as I mumbled “bye” and left the room. The episode was never mentioned again, and luckily not repeated during my days there.

It is difficult to say whether or not the episode between Brian and his mom would have happened if his family had a home, if he was less frustrated by his life situation and had some kind of opportunity to get away from the shelter life and his family once in a while. Maybe his mom would have been more understanding and not so easily aggravated if her level of concern and stress had been lower. In Brian’s case, he could have been a little unruly and heady by nature. Staying at the shelter, however, undoubtedly made him worse. Even during my short time there I thought he seemed more hot-tempered the longer he stayed. His patience with the other kids got shorter, his expression of disapproval more frequent. I would hear him sigh at most of the activities we had planned – yet he still joined, thinking that the option of not participating would be even worse.

As for the incidence with the Marshallese woman and the staff member: the focus here is on the mother and the staff member, not the mother and child. For my purposes, whether or not a parent has the right to use violence as punishment is irrelevant. What is of interest, however, is the way the mother’s authority and self-image was challenged. She was forced to apologize to her child in front of other residents, her other children and staff. No doubt family dynamics will be affected by such incidents, where a stranger challenges the authoritative person. Adding to all the other arenas where shelter

residents lose autonomy it makes the stay challenging for keeping self-dignity and respect. The incidence with the Marshallese mother and the shelter staff is a vivid example of the shelterization process, and a clear demonstration of the ways power imbalance is acted out.

### Using the shelter

In the preceding paragraphs I have tried to account for the ways in which the shelter puts restrictions on its guests and how residents experience it. Here I wish to further discuss how the guests use the spaces provided – and in some cases, don't use it at all.

As mentioned in chapter one, I never saw anyone use the computer room. This was surprising to me, because I thought this room would be essential in order to apply for jobs, take online courses and the like. The computer room was also one of the few places with air condition and was newly renovated by means of a donation to the shelter. Why didn't people use it? Why, if the guests really wanted employment, weren't they constantly using the Internet to look for available jobs? One possible explanation is that, frankly, there aren't that many jobs to apply for. I was told that most residents didn't have education; some hadn't even finished primary school<sup>3</sup>. This decreases the chances of finding a job, definitely one that would pay well enough to support a family. Second, with limited knowledge about computers and even English (as mentioned, quite a few families didn't speak English as their first language) using a computer was difficult at best. When working with the kids, I realised that many had difficulties getting help from parents because they themselves didn't know how to do the assignments. The few

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<sup>3</sup> The immigrants from other Pacific islands in particular.



children that had parents assisting them with their homework also had to have one of the volunteers check the answers. , Usually we would have to re-spell or do the task.

Lacking ability and motivation to use the computer rooms are not the only reasons to why residents rarely went in there. In this paragraph I wish to discuss how restrictions play part on using the room. De Certeau (1984) writes about the use of places and his idea about seeing movement and use of space as a language of the body, or in his words “pedestrian rhetoric” (1984:102). Movement in space will always be an amalgamation of one’s will and restrictions put by the place itself. As previously noted, the shelter had a myriad of rooms with keys, limited access and different purposes. Unlike a home where one can choose to move about freely, rooms at the shelter have regulated times and serve for specific purposes. The residents would have to ask for permission to enter the computer room, to use the computers and explain their intentions. Were they looking for jobs? How long did they want to stay there? Would they need help/supervision? All these factors made the threshold of actually asking high, perhaps to the extent of not bothering to ask at all.

Avoiding the computer room also meant avoiding applying for jobs online. Initially, I thought that this showed that the residents were not trying hard enough to change their life situation. After talking to case managers, however, I came to think of it differently. Kekoa told me that the shelter was a last resort for the families. Often, he said, the families had been trying to get into public housing, apply for loans and living with relatives before they finally had to turn to the shelter. Many had indeed tried applying

for a number of jobs, only to get rejection after rejection. Self-esteem and motivation were low. Avoiding the computer room may therefore be seen as a way of avoiding more disappointments, more rejected applications and more job descriptions requiring competency and education that most didn't have. The computer room, which should have symbolised a place for hope and progress, represented a space where people who were already struggling with their self-image would meet more disappointments. De Certeau writes that "space is a practiced place", meaning that one's being in and acting within a place gives it meaning (1984). I propose that a place itself, by being actively *not used* also qualifies as being a space, because its embedded meaning is created and re-created through avoidance. In this case, the space in question was the computer room left as an unused facility by most. Staying clear of the computer room meant avoiding another let-down, another bruise on your sense of dignity.

Throughout my fieldwork, the space used most by residents was the entrance area. I would always see more than ten people there, of all ages. Some had brought a camping chair to avoid having to sit on the concrete bench that seemed less than safe with its cracks and skewed appearance. The space outside the shelter was in the shadow, making it comfortable even on the hottest days. Children were usually just walking around. I found it odd that most kids didn't seem to play, but were just sitting there or walking back and forth to other kids or parents. The area outside the shelter seemed like an endless waiting space yet I don't know what for. When I had time to sit there for more than ten minutes, I rarely saw adults actually approaching the counter. As I usually came to the shelter because I volunteered at the different programs, I didn't get to spend much time simply observing outside the shelter. In addition, both the staff and I stressed that

my role should be as a volunteer, not as an anthropologist. These made me observing over long periods of time seem unnatural and restricted my access to collecting data. However, I made sure to always mark what people were doing as I entered and exited the building, and I usually showed up 10-15 minutes early, thereby allowing for some observation data most days.

Other residents were also sitting on the curb turned towards the street, just looking out. The view was far from spectacular: across from the family shelter you looked straight on to an empty yet enclosed parking lot and an old concrete building I don't know what was for. Further down the street was a busy road leading to the highway, a gas station and a couple of fast food restaurants. These were places I would occasionally see the guests go to buy food and candy, which I thought was surprising considering their strained economy. I will discuss this further in another section, but here its relevance is that of the guests' movement in the area: the families I usually encountered used the outside area of the shelter and had their route linked to the gas station and the fast food restaurants in the area. I never saw anyone walk *down* the street towards the men's shelter or down the road leading to the highway. In general, it seemed their movement in the area was very limited.

From what I could observe, spending time inside the shelter was avoided. Although no one ever explicitly told me that they tried to avoid staying inside, their actions spoke loud and clear. Most prominent was the empty rooms and hallways. Second, seeing them sit right outside the shelter without entering except when meals were served signaled

unwillingness to stay inside. Third, Brian, a boy aged 16, made it clear that he could not imagine anything worse than being condemned to spending his days inside the shelter. A more explicit expression of the negatives associated with being inside shelter walls was how it was used as a threat to make the kids behave. Unruly as they could sometimes be, one of the few things that actually had an effect when trying to discipline the kids was the threat of sending them to the family room with their parents. Of course the expulsion would also mean not being able to play with the other kids and having to spend time with a parent. But for many of the children their parent(s) were already in the children's room as guardians. The real punishment, then, was having to spend time in the overheated, big room filled with beds and people's few belongings. I found it peculiar that the shelter staff actively used people's aversion towards spending time inside the shelter and especially the "bedrooms" as a means to make the kids behave. If anything, this attitude towards being inside the shelter increases the residents' negative ideas about it.

### Observing the men

Perhaps it was my stereotypical ideas about homeless that made volunteering at the men's shelter a little easier. Not regarding my tasks, but my mental attitude and frame of mind seemed to be more at ease at the men's shelter. The residents were almost all male (except for the occasional woman who, because she couldn't or wouldn't comply with the family shelter's rules weren't allowed in there) and most of them looked as if they were in their forties or fifties. The dormitory definitely had the smell I had come to associate with the homeless after living on Oahu for most of the year in 2011, and most had the looks to match. Unclean, unshaven and in rugged clothes, the residents were

easy for me to categorize as homeless bums, probably struggling with some sort of addiction or mental illness. However, I was yet to learn that my preconceptions even at the men's shelter were wrongly undifferentiated. Every breakfast I volunteered at, we handed out somewhere between 100-150 plates to hungry homeless. And although most of the hands and faces I met those mornings seemed to fit my ideas about homeless, I was usually surprised by a number of people who might as well have been getting their breakfast at a coffee shop on their way to work. I was also struck by the gratefulness by most of them, and their politeness. Never have I gotten so many thank-yous and God bless in my life.

The men's shelter had very limited services compared to the family shelter, but there were nevertheless quite a few rules, albeit far less than at the family shelter. The front door had a 24-hour watch, and you always had to identify yourself before walking in. Bedtime was 10pm, and everyone had to get up at 6am, roll their mats up, clean out their area and get ready for breakfast, which was served from 7-8am. Unlike the family shelter, however, one was free to walk in and out of the dormitory during the night, and I would often encounter people who had difficulties sleeping just walking around outside the shelter when I arrived for breakfast service at around 5am. Users of the men's shelter were not obligated to register either for food or to spend the night. The guests were usually only allowed one plate of food, but sometimes we would let them know that they could have seconds, but they had to have kept their plate so that they could re-use it. When breakfast started, one of the staff members at the shelter would call out that table one could line up. We would usually be two to three people dishing up, placing the plates on the counter and then the staff member would hand them out. I was

always a bit curious to why the breakfasts consisted of so many separate dishes that required more work and, in the end, quite a small amount of food for the homeless. A breakfast would for example consist of pancakes, oats, pastry and bacon, yet only be a small taste of each. I couldn't get a clear answer from the staff members in the kitchen as to why they did it like this, but I have a feeling it had something to do with what gets donated and also their idea of what a proper breakfast is. My Norwegian cultural background and knowledge about nutrition told me that a small pancake soaked in syrup, two strips of bacon and a chocolate cupcake wouldn't exactly meet the nutritional needs of a full-grown man.

Breakfast ended at 8am. No matter what. I often found myself frustrated when the lattice had closed down and I heard voices asking for seconds, or even worse – first meals. Sometimes it was because the person was late, but it also happened that serving all of the people took too long, or we ran out of food. Most of the time, however, we ended up with at least a couple things left over, such as extra pancakes or scrambled eggs. After breakfast had been served, the guests had to clean up their plates and leave the dormitory. The room would then be closed until lunchtime at 12, when the same procedure would be carried out. Three meals were served every day, and the room would be open for about an hour, leaving just enough time to get your food, eat and clean up again. The number of people coming in for food was much greater than the number of actual people sleeping at the shelter for two reasons: the dormitory simply didn't have room to fit all that wanted to, but still provided food to the hungry. Second, some of the people assembling outside to get free meals actually had a place to live, yet were so poor they couldn't afford other life necessities such as food. These were the

people I encountered that were anomalies in the surroundings. The number of people coming in for meals also varied greatly with what time of the month it was. From a minimum of about 70 to 150 people came in for breakfast during my time at the shelter. I asked about the great variety in numbers and was told that the 70-something days were the days right after welfare or salary had been paid.

As mentioned, the men's shelter was also the base for the outreach program. That means that the information, group meetings and distribution of necessities such as cups, bandages and food rations was done there, as well as handing out information sheets and, again, signing in. It was on the outreach day I found out that the shelter had two floors, and that the second floor was practically empty. It had a couple offices, but also a big room that wasn't being used. I was told the plan was to try and get funds to put up permanent bunk beds so that more people were able to get a safe and comfortable night's sleep. Case managers who worked mostly with the "hard" homeless, meaning the ones braving the streets, struggling with abuse and/or mental disorders, used the offices. The case managers here were devoted not only to help the ones actively seeking assistance by coming to the shelter, but also to reach out and identify those in greatest need. Their work consisted of asking residents where they came from, if they knew anyone who were too sick or scared to come to the shelter, to go to different popular sites for homeless to dwell and to walk around the streets of Chinatown to hear how the homeless were doing and offer them consultation. When I accompanied the outreach team, I had the bizarre feeling I was promoting some kind of hip new club or shopping mall, leaving pamphlets and telling them to stop by, no commitment or questions asked.

The team from the men's shelter had a much more "come as you are"-attitude towards the homeless people we spoke to because the rules were less strict at that shelter.

### **Constructing a person**

Some of the people we encountered during the outreach day seemed uninterested in listening to the information about the shelter's services and only wanted what free food and water we could hand out. Some wanted to talk, tell stories from their past when they were soldiers, serving the country, had a good job or just how their lives used to be.

When walking around Chinatown and the nearby parks, we encountered several of the latter kind. One man, looking old and ungroomed, held us up for some time when we handed out the bag with Band-Aid's and a plastic cup. After thanking us, he was asked by the outreach-leader how he was holding up. He replied that he had been worse, and that he had definitely experienced worse days. He went on telling us that life now was better than what he had lived through when in the army, but that he took pride in having "served the nation". Having attended meetings about whom the outreach team were specifically working towards getting into permanent housing, I knew that veterans in general were a vulnerable segment of the population. In the back of my mind, I remembered one of my first meetings with homelessness on Oahu spring 2011. As I got off the bus where my university was situated, a man yelling at a moped startled me: "It's a war, it's a war", he called out. Suffering from post-traumatic stress syndrome or other mental illnesses, veterans sometimes fall through the social welfare system and thereby end up on the streets. I was told by one of the shelter staff that many stress their efforts when encountering others, especially when receiving help.



I interpreted this as a way of not necessarily prove to me or the others walking around that life hadn't always been the way it was now, but to remind us – perhaps even themselves – that they were human, they had been unlucky, and just maybe they would be able to rebuild their lives again. I saw it as a way of staying human, using stories and artefacts to prove one's worth, much in the same way that Liebow (1993) explains why so many homeless are seen keeping belongings that are of no actual use to them, such as a TV set or a coffee maker. These artefacts, much like the stories we were told (and indeed the contents of the shopping carts I've seen homeless people pushing around) possess a value for the people holding them that I think is difficult for someone who's never experienced homelessness to fathom. As elaborated upon in chapter one, even the children seemed very preoccupied with their belongings, their new clothes or electronics, and their plans to acquire more goods (i.e. Kayla's plans to buy a computer). Although the USA is a country with a prevalent consumerist culture, the elaborated showing of material things and talking about what to buy seemed exaggerated by the homeless. When Serenity, the 7 year old girl you met in chapter one, said she and her mom had given money to the homeless man, she was watching me closely to see my reaction. When I didn't say anything, only smiled, she quickly added a zero to the amount of money they had given him. Clearly, she was trying to show me how they were generous, and perhaps try to give me the impression that they were well off compared to many others. She definitely succeeded in turning the tables around: rather than being the receiver of gifts, she (and her family) took on the role as *givers*.

People talking about their plans of what to buy and flashing expensive phones weren't necessarily just doing so because of the consumerist culture, but as a means to show that they were *part* of that culture, as successful agents. The children I spent time with also

seemed interested in what to buy and with their belongings, constantly showing off mobile phones and mp3 players if they had one. One of the older kids, aged about 13, overtly put away her phone for everyone to see, usually saying “Well, I guess I should put my phone away now” before doing so. Other stuff being “shown off” would also be new shoes, accessories and new clothes; things I would usually be reminded of were new by the kids. Stories and artefacts become identity papers and an ability to be a “real person”. Emphasising your ability to be a consumer in a consumerist society equals succeeding in acting accordingly to norms. When the homeless, unsheltered men told stories when we provided them with gifts, they shed light on the fact that they had given something too. Kekoa stressed this more than once when I asked him what challenges residents and immigrant residents in particular faced. Owning something – be it material objects or the right to your own life story – gives back some of the self-respect that people in precarious positions struggle to uphold.

As mentioned in chapter one, I would usually become very frustrated when working with the kids. I kept asking myself if they would have acted differently and be easier to deal with if they weren’t in their precarious situation. Reviewing my notes and analyzing adults’ behavior, I cannot come to any other conclusion than that their life at the shelter – their lives as *homeless* - had to have a major impact. Take the difficulties with homework: before ending up at a shelter, I was told that many families have moved around from friends’ and relatives’ homes. These homes aren’t necessarily close by, and so the children are moved around from school to school, if their parents make them go at all. In addition, most families I encountered were immigrants or Hawaiian, which meant that they either spoke thick pidgin or they might not speak English at all. I

remember all too well having to correct a child's homework, after her mother had done them for her. Not only did I feel frustrated because of all the mistakes I had to correct, but also on behalf of the mother's child who had no hope of getting help from home after leaving the shelter.

### **The power of power**

Kekoa, the leader of the case management program, had a few longer talks with me about the residents and their lives at the shelter. Not only did he know much about the different reasons people had ended up there but could also reflect on the negative sides of living there. He acknowledged that it was a paradox that no matter how important he thought the shelter and his and his colleagues' jobs were the shelter also had negative impact on the guests. More than once he told me that they (the staff) were all aware that there were huge power imbalances between themselves and the shelter guests. Liebow (1993) observes the same in his work at a shelter just outside Washington D. C., where he notes that regardless of the relationship between the residents and the staff "its structure is essentially vertical, strongly conditioned by the differences in social class, power and status" (1993:116). The same could be said for the shelter where I volunteered, where I would observe staff and guests laugh and talk about mundane things, children hugging them and showing affection. Yet, at the end of the day, that same staff member might have to give out a warning of eviction if curfew had been broken. The ambivalent relationship perpetuates power imbalance. Being under supervision of other adults increases the feeling of not only being watched over, but also being inferior. From own experience, I felt a bit uncomfortable being an authority at the

shelter when working there, simply because of my limited experience and young age. Working at a shelter means you are somehow in charge, and as Hoffman and Coffey observe in their article about the homeless, many who are receiving services feel infantilized (2008:213).

Power imbalance is everywhere at the shelter, manifested in locked doors, privileges such as showering, being able - or not - to buy take-out for lunch, keeping track of the guests' whereabouts, financial means – the list goes on. When entering the shelter you are obliged to rules and regulations, and what you get in return is help to get back on your feet. This, in turn, makes you the receiver of gifts and services, favours you are unable to repay. When discussing development and financial aid on a larger scale people often speak of the difficulties upholding the receiving part's dignity when they have nothing to repay with (Nustad, 2003). In the case of the receivers of help at the shelter, much of the same can be said. As receivers of aid the guests are expected to be thankful and to comply with rules, not complain and show respect for staff and volunteers. This further increases the feeling of being the one who "should be grateful" and creates an even larger gap between helper and the helped. Being a guest is therefore challenging not only because of your unfortunate life situation, but also because you are forced to deal with social differences that have already been made all too obvious to you. Again, drawing on Hoffman and Coffey's article, there are similarities. Yet, while they discuss how service receivers feel bereft of dignity because of poor treatment, my argument is that many residents at the shelter where I worked didn't necessarily get poor treatment, but had issues being the receiving person of help. I will elaborate on this under the paragraph concerning residents' strategies.

Another reason as to why the relationship between shelter residents and staff is vertical is the mere fact that the one party is homeless. As already briefly discussed in chapter one, the defining of homelessness, both of the term and with it, is imperative for understanding the reworking of power relations. To explain what I mean by this, I draw on Foucault's writings on power.

Foucault (1982a) explored the ways in which we think about power, not just as a phenomenon, but how one can use power as a theoretical tool. As part of his line of reasoning, he suggested that we turn to the ways in which people try and rework power relations, the attempts made by those short of power to dissociate the relations of power (1982a:780). In that way, he thought, social science would be able to say something about power relations in general, not just in a specific relation such as for example the power of men over women, or in this case staff over residents. Reviewing the power struggles found at a shelter, then, can not only serve the purpose of saying something about what is being done in that specific power relation, but shed light on strategies and dissociating power relations in general. Even the defining of someone as homeless is, in Foucault's notion, a form of power, as it "[...] categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him" (1982a:781). Being homeless is a category that holds undesired connotations. Ascribing people as such, then, is a way of exercising power, intended or not. One of the power struggles identified by Foucault is "[...] that which ties the individual to himself and submits him to others in this way" (1982a:781). This is a way that power was exercised at the shelters, albeit intended by neither staff nor residents. I argue that this power struggle is the one most

prevalent at the family shelter, and that residents actively contend the categorization as part of their strategies.

“We have courses and classes to help the guests build self-esteem in order to increase the chances of them applying for and getting jobs”. This is one of the things the shelter’s volunteer coordinate told the new volunteers at the information meeting. I do not doubt the staff’s good intentions, yet the consequences of staying at the shelter for months being told what to do and when make guests feel less in control and less confident after a stay. In fact, Kekoa told me that they are extremely eager to get people out of the shelter and into permanent housing as quickly as possible because it gets more difficult over time. One of the reasons for this is that the guests find it more difficult to stay motivated and to believe in their own ability to get employment. Shelter life, then, has unintended effects that can be consequential for the future prospects of the residents.

## Strategies

Describing the shelter, how families, men and children acted and how the shelter was used leads the way for an analysis of strategies. Describing the different people I encountered in chapter one provides a basis for understanding incentives and differences in seeking respect, dignity and negotiating power. Power imbalance is a key concept when reviewing shelter life and experience. Yet, even if the power relations seem overarching the homeless, it also presupposes some level of freedom. As anthropologist Knut Nustad puts it “the person subjugated dominance has an ability to make choices that, in turn, are limited by the power relation” (2003:25, my translation). In other words, the uneven distribution of power is up for contestation within a

frameset of possible action. The proceeding paragraphs examine the ways shelter residents challenge the power relations by acting within such a framework. The upcoming descriptions also illuminate the ways shelter residents rid themselves of the shelterization process. I have already touched upon some of the strategies utilized by residents, such as the avoidance of the computer room as a means to avoid rejection. Now, let me move on to discuss how a mundane thing such as food is used to do the same.

### **No compliments for the chef**

At the family shelter, I would often hear comments like “These sausages taste like rubber”, “No syrup for me, I don’t eat sugar”, “Don’t you have more oats?” Not only did we hear it when serving the food, but people would also be making jokes about it when spending time with other residents or staff. I often heard residents, young and old, say that they much preferred the fast food restaurants’ meals, and some went to great lengths to get the money to buy their own food. In my eyes, the only thing wrong with the food was that it was too fatty and contained way too much sugar, but buying a meal at KFC didn’t exactly make dinner healthier. In addition, the complaining puzzled me because the residents after all got the food for free, and there were plenty of staff and volunteers (including myself) that had to work hard in order for the meals to be served. In short, the complaints and disapproval of the food evoked anger in me. Why didn’t they appreciate the food? How can someone who’s receiving free food and services not be grateful? The answer, I believe, lies not in the lack of gratefulness itself, but can be derived from the interpretation of *shelterization* – and being opposed to it.

*Homeless* is not a neutral word, and certainly not bereft of stigma. Goffman (1986) writes extensively about the topic and types of stigma. In a culture where everyone's thought to be responsible for his or her own fortune, becoming homeless becomes a stigmatized category in that it is thought to have direct connection to personal traits. Goffman writes about this phenomenon as "[...] blemishes of individual character" (1986:4). Being homeless, then, ascribes traits that indeed are in need for behavior that puts distance between the people in question from the category itself. In that way, the stigmatized can work towards becoming fully human again (Goffman, 1986). So how does complaining about food serve as a means to create a gap between the shelter resident and the stigmatized notion of being homeless? I interpret it as a way of introducing normalcy to an otherwise abnormal situation. Complaining about food is something one might do at a restaurant where one's paid money for a good meal that didn't meet your expectations. It is a way of expressing discontent and even power through being the one paying for a service. In restaurants, the customer is the one weighing heavier on the power scale, and by performing these roles; the residents try to be the heavier plumb. In addition, the shelter staff was very concerned with us (the volunteers) referring to the residents as guests, which enhances the incentive for acting as such: the homeless residents put on an act as guests while the staff acts as hosts. That being said, I saw little other evidence pointing towards this relationship. The residents were called guests, but the stringent rules say otherwise. However, the giving feedback and making jokes about the food introduces a way of expressing power where they have been stripped of it in so many arenas. It is a way of trying to remind, perhaps mostly the residents themselves, of the attempted guest/host relation more so than the staff/resident or giver/receiver. Negotiating the categories as such brings me back to Foucault's writings on power as being exercised through subjecting someone to an



identity. In the case of the shelter, the identity is that of a homeless, a receiver of gifts and services. When shelter residents take on the role as guests, as customers and actively undermine their position as help receivers, they are negotiating power. The power struggle, then, is not directed at the state or large structural forces, but made reworkable through an attempt to redefine one's identity, from that of a helped to a guest.

The strategy used for changing the identity as homeless to that of a guest is thereby an effective one in order to rework power relations. Yet, the indisputable fact is that the idea of being a guest and being hosted is a mere illusion of equalized power relations. Again, using the food as an example: the residents don't get to choose when or what to eat, with whom or how much. What they *can* do, however, is make comments and complaints, taking back some of their autonomy through voicing discontent. In Foucault's terms, the arena where power relations are negotiated can be seen as a "point of possible reversal" and a place where the powerless use a "strategy of struggle" in order to balance the power differences (1982b:225).

As touched upon earlier in the chapter, anthropologists Hoffman and Coffey have written about the ways in which shelter users experience poor treatment and a feeling of losing dignity (2008). They continue their analysis by offering ways in which homeless services can improve their ways so as to better preserve users' dignity. Although I have no trouble understanding that some residents are being treated with less respect and courtesy than what I observed where I volunteered, I can't help but

wonder if the negative feedback Hoffman and Coffey report is also a strategy to uphold dignity. As written earlier, being the receiver of gifts – be it money or services – always comes with the bitter aftertaste of being the one who owes something. At the shelter where I did fieldwork, receiving the gift of food and shelter was constantly being put down by residents at the family shelter. Food was criticized, I also heard people complaining about the slow elevator, the heat and not enough things to do. In general, people at the family shelter seemed to put down most of the services provided. What Hoffman and Coffey notes is that most negative comments (on shelter conditions) were much more elaborated upon than positive ones (2008:217). In the same way, negative comments about the food and other conditions were voiced, yet no one at the family shelter seemed to give praise or show gratitude. Negative feedback in general can therefore also be seen as a strategy to uphold dignity rather than being an objective sign of poor treatment and services. Receiving gifts is easier if it seems the gifts you are getting aren't very good anyway.

Another way of expressing opposition to the shelterization is through the asking for favors. In doing this, the residents actively seek to uphold the idea that they in fact are “customers” of the shelter staff and system more so than clients and the people receiving help. As previously mentioned, being the helped in itself contains unlucky connotations because it is associated with having to be grateful and being lower on the social ladder. Additionally, it defies the norm of reciprocity, adding to the breaking of norms associated with homelessness. In my days at the case management office, I heard guests come in asking for a number of favors, ranging from money to the borrowing of a book, counseling or special privileges at the shelter. Making complaints and requests also

serves another purpose when faced with living at the shelter: being a resident doesn't mean you're there to stay, and it certainly doesn't mean you're there to make friends. The life situation the families and single women are being forced into is temporary – no need to get a good “resume” for being a model tenant when your landlord is the shelter's management. The latter was also shown by how the residents were towards me. At the family shelter, I was widely ignored and barely spoken to. At first, I saw this as a huge obstacle and making my research difficult. After finishing my fieldwork, however, I realized that the avoidance of contact and interest from the family shelter residents holds important data. I was of no importance for the residents there because they probably, and hopefully, didn't have to see me for much longer, and definitely hoped that they would not have to come back to see me again. My role, seen through the residents' eyes, was simply someone helping out yet no one they could benefit from knowing. Shelter rules would stay the same, I couldn't offer any sort of privileges or extra help – I was just *there*. Another reason I interpret their behavior towards me as a way of distancing from the shelter itself is because of the difference in treatment between the family and men's shelter. As I have already mentioned, attitudes toward volunteers in the kitchen at the men's shelter was utterly different from that in the family shelter. This difference also applies to the way I was acknowledged. At the men's shelter, I would meet smiles and engage in conversations. People seemed friendlier towards me and quite a few asked me about where I was from, how I liked it in Hawaii and so on. In all my days at the family shelter, I was never asked anything about myself. In fact, the only time one of the mothers ever spoke to me was after I had complimented her child. I was so caught off guard at her response that I couldn't even respond, this saying something about how used to being ignored I was. When at the men's shelter, however, I would not have been surprised at all.

## Comparing the men and the families

As already mentioned, I experienced great difference between the ways I was treated at the men's shelter compared to at the family shelter. The interpretation of behavior pointing towards the difference in experiencing own life situation – or accepting it - is further emphasized by the difference in expression of gratitude and politeness I between the family shelter, the men's shelter and the unsheltered homeless we encountered.

Working at the men's shelter preparing meals gave me a different perspective on shelter life. Services and living conditions were a lot different, but so were the people receiving the services. How I was treated was also very different. First of all, I was acknowledged at the men's shelter. Not only by the single man thanking me for volunteering, but by the staff there as well. Every morning before serving breakfast, our (my fellow volunteers and I) names were called up thanking us for coming and helping out, followed by applause from the men and few women who were there. This (albeit slightly uncomfortable) tradition actually felt genuine, especially when followed by the many thank yous we got while serving breakfast. Although I heard the occasional remark on the food, it seemed most of the residents liked and appreciated the food and the effort put in by the staff and volunteers. When leaving the shelter at about 9am after four hours in the kitchen, I also encountered friendly faces and words. I know my gender and age must have had some effect, because there were a few occasions I was asked out on dates or got a number and name attached to my moped. However, this was the exception, not the rule, and most of the time I was met with pure expressions of gratitude for my effort. In our outreach rounds I was also met with the same kind of

attitude, and people seemed more open and willing to have conversations. Why was this so? Again it is useful to turn to the ways in which people make strategies in order to keep dignity and self-respect.

When working with homeless, one is bound to see the different ways in which they are being treated. Even my friends, when asking about whom I met and worked with, seemed to take more pity on the families and single women than the men I spoke about that lived at the shelter. Hoffman and Coffey note that “[...] cultural stereotypes around age and gender affect the way society views homelessness. Women and children are viewed with compassion while men are judged to be at fault” (2008:217). I discussed the different types and categories of people who are homeless in chapter one. Now, let’s move onward and see how those differences affect the ways in which people behave in order to uphold self-respect. As the latter quote says, the ways in which we view the homeless person also affects to what degree we sympathize. Wikan (2012) writes extensively about empathy and how, in a world full of cultural constraints and expectations, all people have a basic need to “[...] feel good about oneself” (Wikan, 2012). If her notion of feeling good about oneself is universal, then people of all social classes and in all different life situations will find means to uphold some sort of dignity. The residents at the family shelter did this by creating distance between themselves and the category of homeless, the helped, the powerless. The residents at the men’s shelter and the unsheltered people we met, however, maintained their self-respect by acting as appropriately as they could, gaining others’ respect by being polite and grateful. I argue that doing so is highly influenced by the way society views them – being the ones to blame for their unfortunate situation. Veterans used stories of their efforts and sacrifice

to tell us, the people providing services and gifts, that they too had given something. Again, evening out the issues surrounding receiving gifts has tangible effects. The strategies utilized may be very different, but the goal of one's actions was the same: feeling good, or at least better, about oneself in a situation where there are very restricted means to take from. The residents at the family shelter were able to use the distancing strategy because their stay was (hopefully) temporary and only a "bump on the road". The residents at the men's shelter, as elaborated on in chapter one, face a much different reality where most of them have come to terms with their situation and don't have much hope of getting into permanent housing. At the case management office, I had the opportunity to speak to several of the case managers who would be very honest about the future aspects of some shelter residents. When reviewing cases, I was sometimes told that they were working to keep the person in question as healthy and well as possible, but that they knew that all the years of abuse or the like would not end. They knew that what they had to offer was some dignity, food and a safe place to sleep at night, but that they had little to no chance of getting the person into permanent housing. The reasons would differ, but the main problem with getting some of the users of the men's shelter into permanent housing was that they were struggling with some kind of addiction. This meant that they could not comply with the rules you needed to in order to get public housing, and so they ended up as regulars at the men's shelter instead. In fact, the staff members seem to evaluate chances of success with the different people they meet. One of the days at the case management office, Kekoa, the program leader, seemed upset that we were going out to see a man who was struggling with alcohol abuse. "You're wasting time on that guy. He doesn't want help", he said to us before we walked out. Assessing people's need and want for help is part of the job that shelter staff has to do in order to make priorities. Unfortunately one is sometimes forced to realize

that some people are beyond helping, and so the men's shelter becomes a refuge not to eliminate the problem but to ameliorate the everyday lives of those who have given up and been given up on.

Their different situations and future prospects influence how they present themselves to others and how they seek respect and dignity. Apart from the two shelters compared, reviewing the population that remain without any sort of shelter provides an interesting view on the problematic notion of shelterization and strategies people use in order to avoid it.

### **Why live on the street if you can stay at the shelter?**

#### **Making homelessness curable**

At a case management office's monthly meeting, I was to learn a new word: anosognosia. It was frequently used when talking about why homelessness was so difficult to annihilate, why people refused help and why patients and residents at the shelter didn't do as they were told. Anosognosia is a term used to describe when a person is unaware of his or her own disability or illness. Kekoa gave us a quick lecture on the word as to initiate the meeting. The other case managers and I, about 12 people in total, were all asked to interpret the word. Some came with examples. I was surprised to find that not only were the case managers discussing the residents with mental illness, but people that lived there in general, who seemed to not "Understand the severity of their situation" or "Not do what they should because they don't understand how important it is" as some of the case managers put it. I was surprised that they chose to view homelessness in the same way they viewed and worked with people with disabilities. Anosognosia is a term that is meant to apply to people who, for one reason or another,

cannot seem to realize that they are sick. How then, could the people working with homeless, compare that to not saving enough money to get into permanent housing?

As I have previously mentioned, Kekoa said that he did not think the problem of homelessness could go away. Yet, in order to work with homeless and try to get permanent housing for as many as possible, there must be an underlying motivational factor that gets you to do your job – and that gets your shelter services government funding. What would happen if the case managers and staff at the shelter simply accepted that some people prefer life on the streets or that sometimes, no matter how hard you try and what you do, you cannot seem to afford a place to stay? Anosognosia serves as a perfect explanation – and excuse. For the people who stayed at the shelter for long periods of time, blaming them for not trying hard enough, for not seeing the problem or taking it seriously enough served as the perfect excuse. As a discourse, medicalizing homelessness is not a new discovery. Lyon-Callos writes extensively about the topic, explaining how shelter staff has a tendency to attribute individual flaws or disabilities to people who experience homelessness (2000). By doing so, they are actively diagnosing a specific, individual issue which is then made curable, because it has been detached from structural forces far more difficult to change (Lyon-Callos, 2000). When explaining failure to get people into permanent housing or the people refusing to come to the shelter, staff used anosognosia as a tangible excuse. My argument is that part of the reason why some unsheltered homeless chose to stay unsheltered was to avoid shelterization. It can therefore be seen as a conscious strategy used to keep autonomy, refusing to give up individual rights to get “help”. I must stress that I do not doubt the good intentions of the staff at the shelter. However, they made the problem of homelessness into a treatable condition, far easier to work with than if one is to see the



growing number of homeless as a consequence of structural forces one cannot control. Applying a medical term such as anosognosia makes homelessness something personal, explainable and in their eyes, possible to “cure”. It is a term that makes sense when not being able to understand why someone would choose to live on the streets when there is a shelter to go to. However, anosognosia falls short of exploring the many factors that could be instrumental to explain homelessness and the aversion people have to shelter life.

### **Alternatives to anosognosia**

Since I thought it was peculiar that the case management meeting had been so focused on anosognosia, I asked Kekoa about it later. I asked why he thought some people chose to live on the streets instead of the shelter a few days after the outreach day. I found it hard to understand why so many of the people we met chose to live on the streets, yet found the idea about not being able to realizing one’s own situation seemed a bit far-fetched. After all, even if you could live an ok life as homeless, surely there would be days that were worse and you really came to grasp the severity of your life situation. Seeing some of the homeless population struggling with lack of medical assistance and facilities, I was convinced that anosognosia was not the explanation. I had also heard other case managers speak of dangerous conditions, especially where drugs and money were involved. Homeless people in Hawaii face difficulties of finding safe shelter on the street, they are constantly being moved around by law enforcers and are prone to judgemental eyes or comments. As anticipated, Kekoa told me that many aren’t willing to comply with shelter rules. These rules were the curfew and staying sober, but I knew that the rules at the men’s shelter weren’t all that stringent. The men and women we stopped and talked to on the streets that seemed more or less uninterested in the

shelter's services also never mentioned being unwilling to come to the shelter because of rules. What they did, however, was seem accepting of their situation. I don't mean to say that they didn't experience the hardships of being without shelter, but they seemed to have come to terms that this was their lifestyle now.

One man, probably in his early forties, told us he was quite satisfied with how he had managed his life on the streets. He enthusiastically told me and the other volunteers how he had found the perfect sleeping spot in the street, where he was close to an ATM that had a surveillance camera and a public building on the other end that also had surveillance. It was also close to streetlights, so he felt protected by the cameras and knew that no one would try to rob him off his belongings or become violent because they knew they'd get caught. He also selected this particular spot because it was quiet and close to a day shelter where he could get a coffee or shelter from the rain if needed. In short, the man we talked to was what one could call an experienced homeless, perhaps making him *good at it*. For the people living outside on the streets, I assume this was a big part of the explanation as to why they didn't come to live in a shelter. They had gotten used to living on the streets, even comfortable. For many of the people we spoke to this was the life they were used to and knew, making the way to the shelter far more stressful and less attractive. In addition to the familiarity and habit of living on the streets, the ones who had succeeded in doing so are also entitled to respect from other homeless for their clever choices and solutions to make their homeless situation as comfortable as possible. Again, the man's almost bragging way of explaining his calculated choices of "residence" bears witness to this. A later visit to one of the more sophisticated homeless spots of residing, like the bridge area discussed in chapter one, also showed the planning and ways of shaping places to sleep and live that the people

utilize in order to stay safe and comfortable. These spots were planned and built in ways to avoid bad weather; to have some sort of privacy and even had a gathering space for the population residing there. In addition to being a source for respect from other homeless, some of the unsheltered people we met also found a source for dignity and our respect through behaviour. As explained in chapter one, the man we met in the park apologizing for being “our problem” and also taking on the role of someone else’s caretaker serves as an example of the ways in which people seek respect. Rather than telling a story of serving the country, the man described told us his story of being compassionate and a resource for the woman in the wheelchair that he felt he needed to take care of.

The leader of the outreach program, James, agreed with me when I later proposed the idea that the unsheltered had simply gotten used to being just that, but also added that some feared being controlled and losing one of the few things they had left; their right to self-determination. This is where shelterization comes in. People that had stayed at the shelter spoke of rules, times and being controlled by the staff. I was also told that some set out rumours that the shelter staff had poisoned their food, were spied on and so forth. Years of being stigmatized, living on the streets without secure housing and environment make many of the people living on the street nervous and wary of strangers, I was told. During the outreach day I heard stories from the leader of the program about how he had tried getting in contact with a few homeless for years, but that their anxiety for strangers and difficulties trusting others were in the way. Failed attempts of getting into permanent housing were also a factor he mentioned, as some of the unsheltered people we met had been living at the shelter on previous occasions.

An important factor that may shed light on the avoidance of being a shelter resident is the incentive to remain in control. Avoiding shelters is a way to stay in control of your own life, it works as a way to negotiate power relations and not owe anything to any service provider. Not entering shelter grounds means that you are free of having to reciprocate any favours, as well as signing contracts or obeying rules. Terming this strategy “opting out” Hoffman and Coffey write that it “[...] affords them an important sense of agency that allows them to disappear from the grid of visibility and reappear on their own terms” (2008:216).

Another explanation as to why many chose not to go to the shelter is pride. It became clear to me that taking the final steps into the shelter may indeed be steps laden with feelings of shame, anxiety and defeat. Kekoa and the other case managers told me that it made it difficult sometimes to prevent homelessness, because people would be reluctant to seek help before ending up on the street. Of course, this factor goes for all those who experience homelessness. Kekoa’s emphasis on how people were reluctant because of pride may also be influenced by the constant talk about anosognosia. In staff member’s eyes, the failure to accept or realize own situation – compared to a disease – could be obscured by for example feelings of pride. Whatever the reason, however, there is little doubt that coming to the shelter puts you in a category – homeless. No matter what strategies utilized to keep dignity and some sort of power, the status itself makes you a subject for stigmatization. The walls inside the shelter serve as a constant reminder of just that.

# Conclusion

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## **What strategies does the homeless population of Oahu use to negotiate power difference and dignity at homeless shelters?**

Conclusive thoughts always find their way back to initial questions. And as any decent research question, it also brings forth yet another myriad of unanswered ones. The research question I posed may seem clear enough. What do people actually do in order to equalize power differences and to keep a sense of dignity? I could make a list of specific actions: people use the means at hand to complain, thereby changing their status from shelter resident to *guest*. People avoid relations with staff and volunteers in order to remind both us and themselves that their situation is transitory. People ask for services, as if they were paying customers entitled to a certain standard of services. People buy new clothes and talk about being givers of gifts, taking the focus away from being the receiving part. People identify as completely different than “other” homeless. Some try to impress by taking responsibility for others. And another few go all in trying to be “the perfect guest” – acting in ways to earn respect and admiration for acting so proper and in line with the norm when they are in fact challenging norms by their mere situation. What all these strategies have in common, however, is the aim at redefining their statuses as homeless to that of a caretaker, a guest, and most of all: a person.

Reviewing the strategies used in order to negotiate power and dignity required adding a number of questions which I hope to have illuminated. Who are the homeless people on

Oahu? What are their goals and motivations for the stay at the shelter? What challenges do they face as being defined as homeless? What I found was that there are no clear-cut definitions of who or what to expect a homeless to be like. Especially difficult is it when realizing that homeless is not such a homogenous field as one might expect. The precariat, as a social class, is the segment most vulnerable to becoming homeless. They are the families in financially insecure positions, the single woman or man, or the veteran without social support. As such, homelessness serves as an outcome, not as an individual flaw or disability, neither as a disease or failing to comply with society's norms. Understanding the reasons and diversity in the field also opens for an understanding of the ways people choose to seek dignity, and the means they have at hand to do so. The holistic ideal in anthropological research opens for discussions lying in the periphery of the initial questions posed. These issues are imperative in order to explain the complexities found in the field. For example, only reviewing a mother complaining about food at the family shelter would not have been much basis for analysis. Reviewing, however, how the shelter effectively does something to its residents, how being defined as homeless affects you, how the homeless are stigmatized and the future prospects of the mother opens for understanding. As Wikan encourages, one must take into consideration the informants' multiple, compelling concerns (Wikan 2012). The mother's actions can only be understood when taking other aspects of her life into consideration. What is at stake for her when being a homeless, a shelter resident? It may be losing authority over her children. It could also be the loss of faith in getting permanent housing or the basic belief that one is a person, a citizen, not just another file in the case management office or a receiver of help. Actions are performed as means to prove self-worth, rework power relations and upholding dignity.

The homeless, single man without much chance of obtaining permanent housing use a different strategy for gaining respect than the mother with two kids. Their background and future prospects lay the basis for action. I have shown how the different people on Oahu – the people at the Family Shelter, Men’s Shelter and unsheltered I met – negotiate power through simple acts such as telling their story or complaining about food. I also hope to have showed, on a more general basis, what shelter life does to people, intended or not. By reviewing staff discourse, explaining unsuccessful stories and people who decline the offer of being helped in medical terms, I have also said something about how social problems are made into tangible diseases to be cured, removed from structural issues that seem unchangeable. As such, the need for individual action, for agency, becomes even more important for the people defined as homeless. Proving one’s good upbringing and familiarity with good and proper behaviour is one way of doing this. Another is the “opting out” (Hoffman and Coffey, 2008), where the strategy is based on avoiding shelter systems altogether.

On a general basis, what I have shown is the need that people in precarious positions – perhaps not just homeless – have to uphold dignity and search for respect. Bourgois found the same in his analysis of crack-dealers in East-Harlem, yet with a completely different group of people. Or did he? Could the observation and analysis of the ways in which homeless people on Oahu – be it sheltered or unsheltered, men, women or children – provide us with an insight not only applicable to the people I met, but to people who are in precarious positions in general? Only further observation and analysis on the topic will tell.

When reviewing the ways power is negotiated at the two shelters, can it tell us something about power relations in other arenas, with other people, in other cultures?

Perhaps. As with Foucault's pursuit to find a theoretical tool for understanding power relations, one simply needs to keep investigating the field of power relations as to either confirm or refute his ideas. I hope to have showed, at least, that there are existing strategies that people use to equalize power relations among Oahu's homeless.

Conducting fieldwork for only a matter of months cannot, unfortunately, be a pillar for general assumptions. The field is much too diverse and complex for such a statement, but I do hope this thesis can advocate further research and interest in the field. As Standing writes, the social class in which many homeless belong, the precariat, is only a growing group of people. Based on his assumptions then, it would seem the problem of homelessness is not one that will be easily annihilated any time soon.





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One of the shelter pamphlets, stressing the values foundational to their services

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